

The impact of the imaginal and dialogical  
(relational) processes in the Spiritual Exercises,  
on image of self and image of God in women  
making the Nineteenth Annotation Retreat.

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## DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Programme in The School of Theology and Religion, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Title: The impact of imaginal and dialogical (relational) processes in the Spiritual Exercises, on image of self and image of God in women making the Nineteenth Annotation Retreat.**

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The thesis is situated in the interface between psychology and Christian spirituality. It explores the experience of women in the South African context making the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius as a Nineteenth Annotation Retreat. The results of the study show that shifts in image of self and image of God are facilitated by the imaginal and dialogical/relational processes in the Spiritual Exercises. A qualitative, hermeneutical approach was taken in which nineteen women were interviewed about their experience of making the Spiritual Exercises. Fifteen of these were interviewed after completing the Spiritual Exercises while four were interviewed during the process. Shifts towards more positive self and God-representations were reported by all but one of the women interviewed. Images of God shifted from distant or ambivalent to positive relational images. Images of self also shifted in concert with shifts in image of self, with the women coming to see themselves as intrinsically valuable and unconditionally loved by God. A marked lessening in defensive processes was also noted. A constructive interpretation of the themes which emerged from an analysis of the data was done from both psychological perspective and spiritual-theological perspectives. From a psychological perspective Object-Relations theory and Dialogical Self theory were used to better understand the mechanisms enabling shifts in God and self-representation. From a spiritual-theological perspective, Rahner's (1960, 1964) relational theology of grace shed light on the spiritual processes in the Spiritual Exercises which facilitate shifts in image of God and self.

Imaginal dialogical or relational aspects of the Exercises were found to play an important role in facilitating shifts in both image of self and image of God. The findings of this study provide compelling evidence for the interplay between psychological and spiritual processes in the Spiritual Exercises in particular, and spiritual experience in general, resonating with the work of Meissner (1987, 2003) and Ulanov (2001). It also resonates with Rahner's (1960, 1964) theology of grace as God's self-communication which parallels the move in psychology towards the relational which is strongly evident in both object-relations theory and the more recent Dialogical Self psychology.

**Keywords:** Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius; The Spiritual Exercises and women; Dialogical Self theory; imaginative contemplation; 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat; imaginal landscape; imaginal dialogue.

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The laywomen who work as volunteers in the Centre for Ignatian Spirituality (now the Jesuit Institute-South Africa) have been an unfailing source of support and encouragement. Many of them

agreed to be interviewed for this thesis and approached their directees to ask if they would be willing to participate. I was overwhelmed by the generosity of all the women who so willingly agreed to share their personal experiences of prayer in the Exercises with me.

In a more long-term sense this thesis owes much to the support of my family. My parents, Roz and David have encouraged my academic interests and always believed in my abilities even when my Grade 1 teacher pronounced it unlikely that I would ever complete high school! Their love and support and that of my siblings, Alastair and Catriona has nurtured in me the freedom to respond to my own deepest desires which include the pursuit of knowledge not for its own sake but for the ways in which it can be practically applied. My hope is that this work will be of help to those of us engaged in this important ministry of giving the Exercises especially in our South African context.

**AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM.**

# CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

“Imagination is evidence of the Divine” (William Blake 1757-1827)

In this thesis I argue that the imaginal and dialogical processes of the Spiritual Exercises facilitate profound shifts in image of self and of God in women making the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. The Jesuit poet Patrick Purnell writes with respect to the Spiritual Exercises that “Imagination is a true way of knowing; it can be thought of as the access to the real through the unreal” (Purnell 2004: vii). The research which explored the experience of twenty women in South Africa who made the Spiritual Exercises in daily life<sup>1</sup> showed that sustained use of imagination and dialogue through Gospel Contemplation and colloquy in the Spiritual Exercises enables new or dormant aspects of the self to emerge and to engage with new images of God.

## 1.1 THE CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius are a retreat process which has been widely used over the past 500 years as a method of helping the individual to grow in his or her relationship with God. From young men like the first companions of Ignatius seeking to discern a state of life, to an older woman living in Soweto in 2008 wanting to deepen her relationship with God, the Exercises have proved liberating for many. Since the late 1960’s when the directed retreat method was reclaimed, the Spiritual Exercises have been the basis from which many spiritual directors, Roman Catholic and Protestant, lay, religious and ordained have been trained. Women currently making and giving the Spiritual Exercises in South Africa come from a range of cultural and denominational backgrounds; they include English, Sesotho and Afrikaans women; Baptists, Methodists, Dutch Reformed, Anglican and Roman Catholic. All of these women made the Exercises in daily life as opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> The complete Spiritual Exercises in daily life is also known as a 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat.

laywomen to make the 30-day retreat have, until very recently,<sup>2</sup> been virtually non-existent in South Africa. Also few would have been in a position to leave family and work responsibilities for that length of time. The majority of the women interviewed made the Exercises under the auspices of the Center for Ignatian Spirituality<sup>3</sup> in either Johannesburg or Pretoria.

## **1.2 THE INTERDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF THE STUDY**

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study in the areas of Christian Spirituality and Psychology. It seeks to better understand the spiritual and psychological processes within the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius which facilitate shifts in image of God and image of self in women. Ignatius, who lived in an era before psychology evolved as a distinct discipline, evolved the Exercises as a method of spiritual growth involving a process in which immaturities, inordinate attachments and, what we today might term psychological blocks or defenses, are dissipated in order to allow the person to be as open as possible to the action and invitation of God. We can look at what takes place in the Spiritual Exercises both from a spiritual and psychological perspective. As I hope to demonstrate in this thesis these perspectives are complementary rather than divergent.

Sandra Schneiders (2005a) in her writings on the still relatively new academic discipline of Spirituality emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary study. While Psychology as a discipline (with some notable exceptions)<sup>4</sup> has historically tended to be suspicious of religion and spirituality and less open to being influenced by its insights, I was intrigued to note that at a recent international psychology conference on Dialogical self theory held in Cambridge,<sup>5</sup> a seminar devoted to Dialogism and Religion was well-attended. Perhaps as the academic disciplines of Psychology and Christian Spirituality mature and become more established there is less need to protect

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<sup>2</sup> The Jesuit Institute-South Africa is offering the Exercises in the 30-day format open to clergy, religious and laity for the first time in November 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The Centre for Ignatian Spirituality has been incorporated into the Jesuit-Institute South Africa since 2007

<sup>4</sup> For example Transpersonal and Jungian approaches

<sup>5</sup> The Fifth Conference on the Dialogical Self was held from 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

territory and more openness to the potential richness of the insights into the understanding of human experience which each has to offer.

In Rome in 2003 an international conference of directors of the Spiritual Exercises was held by the Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality.<sup>6</sup> The conference gathered together experienced givers of the Exercises from all over the world. The discussions recognized that with the Exercises being given in many different contexts and cultures and applied and adapted in many different ways, one could expand our understanding of the ways in which the graces of the different “Weeks” of the Exercises were being experienced. There seemed to be significant consensus that the liberating effects of the Exercises were being experienced by directees both on a spiritual level and an emotional/psychological one.

In some senses the distinction between spiritual and psychological is a false one especially in an African context in which there is a much more holistic view which would see spiritual and psychological development simply as human development. However for the purposes of the study I start out making that distinction in order to look with different lenses at the experience of women making the Exercises and perhaps in the end to show that the two are in fact inseparable.

### **1.3 THE RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

My rationale for the research arises out my work over the past ten years in the ministry of giving the Spiritual Exercises in Johannesburg and the surrounding areas.<sup>7</sup> This work has been focused on giving the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in daily life (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Annotations) and on training others to do so. I have worked predominantly with laywomen of different denominational and cultural backgrounds. As a psychologist and a spiritual director I was struck by the fact that the effects of

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<sup>6</sup> I attended this conference to represent Southern Africa

<sup>7</sup> After making the Spiritual Exercises in daily life (19<sup>th</sup> Annotation) I studied at Heythrop College of the University of London and did the three- month residential programme including the 30-day retreat at St Beuno’s Spirituality Centre in North Wales. On return to South Africa in 1999 together with the Jesuits, I set up a centre for the giving of the Spiritual Exercises.

making the Spiritual Exercises seemed to be both spiritual and psychological. The shifts experienced by women in relation to their sense of identity or self seemed to be a significant outcome for many of the experience of making the Exercises and seemed integrally connected with a shift in their image of God. I also noticed that the psychological shifts in relation to an increase in self-esteem and confidence happened much more quickly than they would tend to in psychotherapy and that those shifts tended to be sustained.

It seems important to try to understand something of the experience of these laywomen who make the Exercises. What happens for them in that process? What desires, concerns and questions do they bring to the process? What spiritual and psychological shifts if any are facilitated by the process of making the Exercises? The voice of women and their experience of making the Spiritual Exercises are largely missing from the literature. Despite the now large numbers of women both making and giving the Exercises, most of what has been written on the Exercises is still from a Jesuit perspective. Apart from the significant work done by Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin and Elizabeth Liebert<sup>8</sup> and some work by Kathleen Fischer (1988) which focuses mainly on the experience of American women, the experience of laywomen remains largely unarticulated in the literature.

Since Valerie Saiving's (1992) seminal article first published in the sixties, feminist theologians have begun to think about the effects of women's socialization on their lives of faith and the way in which our experience of God is influenced by gender. Some psychologists following the seminal work of Gilligan (1982) have pointed out similarly that psychological development is shaped differently in the lives of most women. This literature which will be discussed further in the next chapter suggests that many women struggle with a lack of self-worth and with claiming their own legitimate needs. The sense of never being enough and of needing to earn and keep a place in the affections of the other seem to still be key for the majority of women, irrespective of the influential positions they may now hold in business, academia or other professional fields.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed. Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women.* (New York. Paulist Press 2001).

I was interested in whether women coming into the Exercises did indeed tend to have a negative image of self and whether and how the Exercises could free them to move to a more positive image of self. Many of meditations in the Exercises, for example, some in the First Week and *The Three Kinds of Humility* in the Second Week would seem likely to be unhelpful to women already struggling with issues of self-esteem. If the Exercises were experienced by the women making them as helpful in positively shifting their experience not only of God but also of themselves it seems important to try to understand something of how this takes place and what aspects of the process appear to facilitate this shift.

#### **1.4 IMAGE OF GOD AND SELF: DELINEATION OF TERMS**

Spiritual directors are interested in the retreatant's image of God because it largely determines the kind of relationship that the person is able to experience with God.

*Image of God* is the way the person sees and experiences God. It is formed by the early experience of significant relationships especially parental relationships and by the person's interpretation of God's role in the events and experiences of his/her life. It is also made up of knowledge about God gleaned from parents and other significant adults; catechesis and cultural images of God. It is the expectation that the person, out of all these experiences, brings to the relationship with God.

By *image of self* I mean the person's experience of self which is made up of their attitude towards themselves; the extent to which they do or do not feel loved, valued, appreciated, competent and purposeful. Image of self is about the way the person sees him/herself. This image of self or sense of self is mirrored to them through their contact with others-at first with parental figures. It is in relationship that the image of self is formed and in relationship that it may change.

## **1.5 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

My early tentative research hypothesis was that the process of the Spiritual Exercises facilitates shifts in image of self and image of God, i.e. the process of making the Spiritual Exercises facilitates both spiritual and psychological shifts. This hypothesis was based on my observations of having given the Spiritual Exercises to a number of women and having supervised other directors guiding retreatants through the process. As I analysed the initial interviews a more focused hypothesis emerged: *Shifts in image of God and self are facilitated by imaginal and dialogical (relational) processes in the Spiritual Exercises.*

## **1.6 AIMS OF THE RESEARCH**

The aim of the research is threefold:

Firstly the research seeks to explore what the experience of making the Spiritual Exercises meant for the women interviewed and whether they reported any shifts in image of God and self related to the process of making the Spiritual Exercises.

Secondly, and most significantly, the research aims to explore what factors and processes in the Spiritual Exercises both psychological and spiritual, might facilitate shifts in image of God and self.

Thirdly the research aims to offers suggestions to spiritual directors of women making the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat regarding the factors which may facilitate or impede positive shifts in image of God and self.

## **1.7 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

Each exercitant's experience of the Spiritual Exercises will be unique. In reflecting on the experience of women I am in no way suggesting that women's experience is uniform. The richness of the Exercises process is precisely that it facilitates each

exercitant's own distinctive encounter with God. There seems nevertheless to be merit in gaining a better understanding of what the majority of women found most helpful in their experience of making the Exercises and in attempting to understand better the processes which the women reported as facilitating positive shifts in their image of God and self.

One of the strengths of the research is that a fairly large number of women were interviewed in some depth. This is the first time that such research has been conducted in the South African context and enables us to hear the voices of laywoman making the Exercises. Although the number of black African women in the study is very small, the experience of lay women black and white, living in the South African context is a voice which needs to be heard in looking at how the Exercises speak anew to people in different contexts.

The fact that I interviewed women only does not allow me to make comparisons between the experience of men and women making the Exercises. It does allow me however to explore and to attempt to articulate something of the experience of these laywomen. At times I do however contrast their experience with what has been written in the (predominantly masculine) literature about the Exercises. It would be worth conducting similar interviews with men who have made the Exercises in order to see what similarities and differences may emerge in the overall experience of men and women making the Spiritual Exercises.

## **1.8 METHODOLOGY**

I wanted to understand the spiritual and psychological processes which enabled shifts in image of God and self to take place. A qualitative hermeneutical approach was taken in which women were interviewed about their experience of making the Spiritual Exercises as a 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat. Interviews were analysed immediately so that themes and theory could emerge from the data. In the course of analysing the interviews imaginative prayer with its dialogical focus, began to emerge from the interviews as particularly important in facilitating shifts in image of God and self. In my reading while in the process of analyzing the interviews I encountered the

dialogical self psychology of Hermans et al<sup>9</sup>. This theory was extremely helpful in providing theoretical concepts which seem to shed light on the themes which emerged from the analysis of the interviews. The study shifted to a specific focus on the imaginal and dialogical within the Exercises and on the relationality which these processes facilitate and the title of the study was changed to reflect the new focus on the dialogical and relational aspects of the Spiritual Exercises and the way in which these may be seen to facilitate shifts in image of God and self.

## **1.9 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS**

### Chapter One: Introduction

In this current chapter the background and rationale for the study is given as well as an outline of the thesis chapters.

### Chapter Two: The Spiritual Exercises and Women

This chapter provides a background to the thesis specifically in relation to the Spiritual Exercises; their genesis, structure and purpose. They are briefly situated in their historical context before outlining the situation with regard to women and the Spiritual Exercises in South Africa at the present time. The second half of the chapter focuses on the literature on the Spiritual Exercises specifically related to women which, though still minimal, has grown over the past thirty years. The work of feminist theologians such as Anne Carr (1988) and Valerie Saiving (1992) are examined with regard to the kinds of issues women grapple with in relation to their image of self. The chapter draws extensively from the most significant work on women and the Spiritual Exercises by Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) which looks at the experience of women (predominantly in the United States) making the Exercises and at the ways in which the Spiritual Exercises can be liberating for women.

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<sup>9</sup> Their body of work started in the early 1990's for examples see (Hermans, H. and Kempen, H. 1993. Hermans, H.; Rijks, T; and Kempen, 1993. H. Hermans, H, Kempen, H, and Van Loon 1992).

### Chapter Three: Psychological Theories

Two theoretical approaches which seem to be helpful for analyzing the results were chosen. They are the more established object-relations theory and the more recent Dialogical-Self theory of Hermans et al (1992, 1993, 1996, 2001, 2004). Object-relations theory and the work of Rizzuto (1979) on the God-representation, is important for understanding how the God-representation is formed and that it can change. Dialogical-Self theory provides a number of extremely useful concepts for understanding shifts in image of God and self. These include “imaginal dialogue”, the “private audience” and “possible selves.” In the latter part of this Chapter, I examine how concepts involving the dialogical self may be applied to the Spiritual Exercises in general.

### Chapter Four: Research Methodology

In this Chapter the research methodology used is described. As the study is interdisciplinary its methodology is also influenced both by research practice in Christian Spirituality, most notably the hermeneutic method favored by Sandra Schneiders (2005b) as well as qualitative research practices in psychology drawing on the work of Kvale (1996) and Silverman (2006).

### Chapter Five: Emerging Themes

Nineteen women were interviewed. Fifteen were interviewed after having made the Exercises in daily life. Four other women were interviewed at various points during the process of making the Exercises. Two of the women are presented in more depth as case studies. The results of the interviews are presented according to the themes which emerged in the course of the interviewing process. These include shifts in image of God; shifts in image of self; the relationship between shifts in image of God and image of self; mechanisms which facilitate shifts in image of God and self including Gospel Contemplation; colloquy and the relationship with the Spiritual Director. The role of the “election” in the experience of the women interviewed also emerged as significant.

## Chapter Six: Interpretation from a Psychological Perspective

In discussing the results of the interviews from a psychological perspective I argue that Object-relations theory and the work of Winnicott (1960, 1965, 1971) and Rizutto (1979) are helpful in understanding how image of God and self are formed and can change, while Dialogical-Self theory provides a way of understanding the process by which these shifts may be facilitated particularly with regard to a lessening of defensive mechanisms and the expansion of the self.

## Chapter Seven: Interpretation from a Theological Perspective,

This chapter draws on Karl Rahner's (1960, 1964, 1969, 1970, 1978, 2004) relational understanding of grace as God's on-going self-communication. It examines some of the theological factors including grace, desire, discernment and election.

## Chapter Eight: Synthesis Chapter

The psychological and spiritual perspectives are then dialogued in an effort to understand how these processes function interactively and how a context is created in that interaction which facilitates both shifts in image of self and God. In this section I draw particularly on the work of the Jesuit psychiatrist William Meissner (1987, 2003) and psychologist of religion Ann Ulanov (2006).

## Chapter Nine: Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the insights which emerged from reflection on the emerging themes, I offer some recommendations for directors of women making the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.

## **1.10 CONCLUSION**

This thesis examines how shifts in image of God and self may be facilitated by the relational and imaginal aspects of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. This focus was clarified in the course of the research when it became evident that imaginative and dialogical prayer and the dialogue with the spiritual director were key factors in enabling shifts in image of God and self in women making the Spiritual Exercises. Object-relations theory and in particular Dialogical-Self theory proved helpful in theorizing about the possible mechanisms involved in those shifts. Theology and psychology in recent years have both moved towards highlighting the significance of the relational. There is a dynamic interplay between image of God and image of self. As one shifts so does the other. As the image of God begins to shift through imaginal dialogue the experience of seeing oneself reflected in the eyes of an unconditionally loving God changes self-image. In this thesis I argue firstly that the Spiritual Exercises through its imaginal and dialogical processes provide a facilitative context for the development of a positive image of God and self. Secondly, that for women making the Exercises in this context, this shift in image of God and self and the relationship which it enables, is often the most significant outcome of the process. The next chapter will discuss The Spiritual Exercises and will focus on the literature in relation to women's experience.

## **CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW: THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND WOMEN**

The purpose of this chapter is not to draw up a comprehensive account of the history of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Rather, it seeks to provide a description of the process and dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and of some of the key issues facing directors of the Spiritual Exercises. The latter part of the chapter will focus more specifically on the experience of women and the Spiritual Exercises. This chapter will provide a backdrop against which to reflect on the insights that emerge from research interviews with women making the Spiritual Exercises in the South African context regarding both spiritual and psychological development.

### **2.1 THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES**

#### **2.1.1 Spiritual Direction: The broad context**

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius are located within the broader Christian tradition of spiritual direction. In recent times the term “spiritual direction” has met with resistance in some quarters because of its authoritarian and directive connotations. Various alternatives have been proposed including spiritual friend (Edwards: 1980), soul friend (Leech: 1992)<sup>10</sup> (a term reclaimed from the Celtic tradition) and spiritual guide or companion. Nevertheless, despite the reservations expressed by some, the term “spiritual director” remains the description of choice in the most of the literature. Max Thurian’s definition of spiritual direction may be particularly useful for the purpose of this thesis. He writes “spiritual direction or the cure of souls, is a seeking after the leading of the Holy Spirit in a given psychological and spiritual situation” (Thurian 1958:59).

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<sup>10</sup> Leech wrote a book on spiritual direction with this title. *Soulfriend. An Invitation to Spiritual Direction*. (New York: HarperCollins. 1992).

Barry and Connolly define it as,

Help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God and to live out the consequences of the relationship (Barry and Connolly 1982: 8).

Margaret Guenther claims that because spiritual direction is an art and not a science it is not possible to define it precisely. She uses the image of the spiritual director as "midwife of the soul, present and attentive as new life emerges" (Guenther 2000: 299).

As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century after Christ, the Desert Fathers and Mothers<sup>11</sup> practiced spiritual direction in the model of spiritual parenthood. Directees were encouraged to disclose their every thought and action in a process known as manifestation of thoughts so that they could receive guidance from one more advanced in the spiritual life (Leech 1992: 41-42). This self-disclosure on the part of the disciple was vitally important in order that the Desert Fathers and Mothers might exercise the ministry of discernment of spirits.

The Rule of St Benedict strongly influenced western monasticism. In some writings the notion of obedience to the spiritual guide is emphasized. In Aelred's monastic theology spiritual friendship is highlighted (Leech 1992: 54).

The Celtic tradition advocated having a soul-friend or *anamchara*. Sellner describes this approach as being associated with affection, intimacy and a mutual respect for each other's wisdom. (Sellner 2000: 362) A soul friend could be male or female, lay or ordained and acted as a counsellor and guide.

In the 12th century, the Dominicans began to give spiritual direction geared towards the laity, and by the following century lay people were giving spiritual direction (Leech 1992: 54). This development was subsequently discouraged and later

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<sup>11</sup> See Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, lives and stories of early Christian women*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

suppressed with the rise of scholastic sacramental theology which for some time sought to ensure that the giving of spiritual direction was the preserve of priests, and which linked spiritual direction strongly to sacramental confession. In the post-Tridentine period, spiritual direction was concerned primarily with issues of conscience and with discerning and nurturing vocations to the religious life. Spiritual directors in the post-Tridentine period were also seen as teachers of ‘safe methods’ of mental prayer and as guardians of orthodoxy. Historically spiritual direction tended to be viewed with suspicion by Protestants because of the sense that this might undermine the place of Christ as the one Mediator (Leech 1992: 84). Even so, some forms of spiritual guidance were frequently practiced amongst Protestants, for example the Wesleyan band and class meetings. The Quaker movement also laid emphasis on mutual direction and admonition (Leech 1992: 87).

In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century at the time of the Protestant reformation there was a blossoming of writings on spiritual direction by such great mystics in Spain including St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross and St Ignatius Loyola. Each of these has added in different but substantial ways to our understanding of the role of the spiritual director. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross particularly helped directors to assist those whose spiritual journey had drawn them into an apophatic way of prayer while Ignatius’s methods tended to be most helpful to those who were best helped to union with God through images, imagination, affect and intellect-the so-called kataphatic approach.

### **2.1.2 Spiritual Direction in the Ignatian tradition**

St Ignatius of Loyola<sup>12</sup> is particularly known for his contribution in the areas of discernment and of the Discernment of Spirits and for his development of a retreat process known as the Spiritual Exercises.<sup>13</sup> His understanding of the role of the spiritual director encompasses both “spiritual conversation” in which one might speak

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<sup>12</sup> From this point on I refer to St Ignatius of Loyola as ‘Ignatius’.

<sup>13</sup> This process of the Spiritual Exercises is described in some depth in the course of this chapter.

informally with another about the things of God as well as the particular and more formal role of the spiritual director as a giver of the Spiritual Exercises

The role of the spiritual director in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius is described in the so-called “Annotations” or pre-notes for the director. In the context of the Spiritual Exercises<sup>14</sup> Ignatius proposes an understanding of the director of the Exercises as one who keeps out of the way of God’s dealing with the retreatant, allowing the Creator to work immediately or directly with the creature. Outside of the Exercises the director could be more directive or persuasive, for example in exhorting the directee to take up a particular state of life. However, within the context of the Spiritual Exercises themselves, the giver of the Exercises is to take particular care not to do so. In Fleming’s contemporary translation of Ignatius’s Annotation 15,<sup>15</sup> Ignatius writes:

A director always provides the balance for us, both in our times of exhilaration and of discouragement. The director is not the one who urges a particular life decision - for example, to enter religious life, to marry this or that person, or to take a vow of poverty. The director facilitates the movement of God’s grace within us so that the light and love of God inflame all possible decisions and resolutions about life situations. God is not only our creator but also the Director of our retreat, and the human director should never provide a hindrance to such an intimate communication (Ignatius of Loyola 1992: 15).

The other annotations which pertain to the role of the director concern the importance of sensitively applying the Exercises to this particular retreatant and give instruction as to how the rules for Discernment of Spirits are to be applied in the context of the retreat.

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<sup>14</sup> There are several English translations of Ignatius’s text. The most frequently used are by Puhl (1952), Ganns (1996), Fleming (1996) and Ivens (2004) Unless otherwise specified the version used in this thesis is that of Fleming (1996) which has a literal translation on the left hand page of the text alongside a contemporary and inclusive language version on the right hand page. Where one of the annotations is referred to it will be referenced in the following manner eg Sp. Exx. Ann 19. Where any other part of the Exercises is cited it will be referenced by means of the paragraph number of the text eg. Sp. Exx. 75.

<sup>15</sup> There are 20 Annotations which are directives to the giver of the Exercises as to how to direct the exercitant through the Exercises.

### 2.1.3 Ignatius's experience

Ignatius of Loyola was born Inigo Lopez de Onaz y Loyola in about 1491, the last of thirteen children, in the Basque country of Guipuzcoa. As a young man he was sent to work in the household of Juan Velazquez de Cuellar. In 'The Autobiography' dictated by Ignatius to his secretary Polanco, he says that "up until his 26<sup>th</sup> year he was a man given to worldly vanities, and having a vain and overpowering desire to gain renown, he found special delight in the exercise of arms" (Ignatius of Loyola 1985: paragraph 1). A major turning point in his life occurred when in 1521 he was injured in a battle against the French at Pamplona. His leg was shattered by a cannonball and he was taken back to his family home in Loyola to recover. After a near encounter with death on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul he began to recover.

Subsequent months were spent in bed during which time he occupied himself by reading the only two books available: *The Golden Legend* by de Voragine and *A Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony. His reflections and daydreams tended to be of the kind to which he had previously been accustomed such as of winning the honour of his Lady love (speculated by some to be either Queen Isabella of Spain or her daughter the Infanta) by brave and chivalrous deeds. These daydreams became interspersed with a new kind of daydream about the great things he would do for God and how he would surpass the saints in his service of God. It was during this experience of convalescence that Ignatius began to notice differences in his feelings and moods and to realise that these shifts had spiritual significance. During both types of day-dreams he would feel alive and excited. However, he noticed that following the daydreams of chivalrous deeds to win fame and fortune he felt dry and discontented, while after those which concerned doing great things for God he felt consoled and at peace. This discovery was the starting point for the understanding of the Discernment of Spirits, which would become more refined in subsequent years as he continued to reflect on his spiritual experiences and as he spoke with others about their experiences of God.

After his recovery Ignatius made a pilgrimage to the monastery of the Black Madonna at Montserrat in order to make a general confession and dedicate his life to God

before leaving for the Holy Land. An outbreak of the plague prevented him at this stage from pursuing his plan to proceed to Jerusalem so Ignatius ended up spending several months in Manresa where he spent long hours of prayer and did excessive penance in addition to helping with the sick in the local hospice.

The time spent in Manresa was profoundly formative for Ignatius's spiritual development. Many accounts of his life suggest that his experiences at Manresa and the illuminations that he received at the Cardoner River formed the basis for the text of the Spiritual Exercises. Endean is critical of this position. He suggests that the text of the<sup>16</sup> Spiritual Exercises is:

not so much the record of Ignatius's experience at Manresa, but rather the fruit of a later process of reflection and abstraction, informed above all by a recognition that the basic patterns of God's action among us take infinitely many different forms (Endean 2001a: 42).

Ignatius certainly spent much time at Manresa and subsequently, talking with people about 'the things of God' and learning the ways in which people draw nearer to God.

#### **2.1.4 The purpose of the Spiritual Exercises**

Ignatius describes the purpose of the Exercises as:

every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul. (Sp.Exx:1).

This purpose has been articulated in a number of different ways in slightly different translations of the Exercises text and by commentaries on the text. Fleming's contemporary reading of the text describes the purposes of the Exercises as:

increasing openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit, for helping to bring to light the darkneses and sinful tendencies within ourselves, and for strengthening and supporting us in the effort to respond ever more faithfully to the love of God (Fleming 1996: 5).

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<sup>16</sup> I will use Spiritual Exercises and Exercises interchangeably.

In a slightly different vein, Lonsdale emphasizes growth in freedom as the key purpose. The Exercises of the First Week put the retreatant in touch with his or her own areas of unfreedom: “attitudes and dispositions, habits of mind and behaviour, patterns of thought and feeling, dependencies and attachments, weights and burdens from the past which trap and imprison us” (Lonsdale 1990: 136).

The notion of ‘desire’ or the ‘*id quod volo,*’ is fundamental both to the purpose and dynamic of the Exercises. The work of a number of contemporary women writers on the Exercises including Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001), as well as that of Janet Ruffing (2000), highlight the role of the Exercises as a means for the retreatant to uncover her deepest desires which are understood to be planted in the person by God from eternity and which are God’s own desires for the person.

Cusson identifies two major schools of thought regarding the purpose of the Exercises “according to whether the idea of election predominates or the idea of union.” (Cusson 1998: 82-3). The election school is divided by another difference of opinion. The Exercises are seen by this group as a way either of “finding one’s vocation,” or of “reforming one’s life” (Cusson 1998: 83). Having reviewed this debate in some detail<sup>17</sup> Cusson suggests that, although in the time of Ignatius the Exercises tended to be used predominantly for making the choice of a state of life, that “in their origin and fundamental structure they go far beyond this particular point of view, and they are orientated intrinsically, from their beginning, toward a deepening understanding of the Christian vocation” (Cusson 1998: 84).

Directees do tend to come to the Exercises for one of those two general reasons: either because they have an important life decision to make and wish to make it out of as deep a place of freedom and commitment to Christ as possible, or out of a desire to deepen their relationship with God. The effects of the experience, however, would seem to suggest that different retreatants are helped through the Exercises in different ways according to the spiritual and psychological needs they bring to the process. In

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<sup>17</sup> See Giles Cusson, *Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises* (St Louis. Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1998 80-92.), 80-92

the experience of women who have made the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat<sup>18</sup> in Johannesburg it would seem that the most significant experience of the Exercises has very frequently been that of an encounter with a very different image of God which brings deep healing.

At a consultation in 2003 of experienced directors of the Exercises, called by the Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality in Rome, it was noted that making the Exercises tended to give the retreatant the foundational experience that God comes first and often a clear sense of a personal call. Other aspects of what happens in the retreat which were noted by the consultation seem to point to both spiritual and psychological growth facilitated through the process of the Exercises.

Some changes happen in basic spiritual self-knowledge. Exercitants commonly come to a simple self-acceptance and to the acceptance of their life-history as graced. They at least begin to acknowledge their gifts and limitations and to deepen their self-appreciation. They begin to have more appropriate and less inappropriate self-love. Commonly, they deepen their trust in God and grow freer in giving up control over their own lives. Also commonly they experience a great deal of healing of life's hurts and of forgiving those who hurt them. They come to a greater peace of mind and more secure hope that God calls them as they are. (Tetlow 2000:19).

John Veltri is a noted giver of the Spiritual Exercises in the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation format. He suggests that some directees make the Exercises in the classical "Call Mode" while other directees who are still focused on their own growth issues and who seek God's help in dealing with those issues make the Exercises in a "Healing-Mode." (Veltri 1998: 325-326). There is strong consensus in the classical literature on the Spiritual Exercises that they are designed to elicit a generous response in following Christ and that therefore the authentic experience of the Exercises is always in a "Call-Mode." My own experience and that of many of my colleagues is that many women come to the Exercises with unresolved personal issues which need healing and have a deep and life-changing encounter with God in a "Healing-Mode." Whether if

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<sup>18</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation refers to a way of making the Spiritual Exercises in daily life and not in the enclosed setting of the 30-day retreat. This approach is outlined in the 19<sup>th</sup> of Ignatius's instructions to the director termed 'Annotations'.

they made the Exercises again at a later stage the process would function in a Call-Mode is one which is worth exploring.

In the writings about the purpose of the Exercises there is virtually no discussion of the psychological, despite the observation of many directors of the Exercises that the Exercises almost inevitably have a marked psychological impact. This is not surprising as the Exercises are offered primarily as a help towards spiritual growth. However, given the assertion that the spiritual and psychological are inextricably linked (Helminiak 1987; Veltri 1998; Boyd-Macmillan 2004; Liebert 2003; Holgate 2003; Callaghan 2003) this thesis argues that the psychological is a vitally important area to engage with in relation to the Spiritual Exercises. In the African context it would seem particularly important to do so.

For an African person, life experiences are all one thing: you cannot separate them into social, religious, political or psychological experiences. It disturbs a person to realise that there is so much specialization done by psychologists, therapists, counsellors and spiritual directors (Mdluli 1995: 29).

The relationship between psychological and spiritual development is addressed in more depth in the course of the thesis.

### **2.1.5 The dynamic of The Spiritual Exercises**

The movement of the Exercises follows a particular 'dynamic' or pedagogy. At each point in the process the retreatant is to ask God for the grace desired. As each grace is received it precipitates movement towards the desire for the next grace. Desire is the dynamo, which moves the retreatant through the retreat process.

The action of the Holy Spirit in us is not violent; it follows the bent of our being and orients it to the true Life, through the natural path of desire which opens into infinite capacities. (Cusson 1988:122)

In a letter to Teresa Rajadell, Ignatius writes:

If you look closely, you understand that these desires of serving Christ our Lord are not your own, but come to you from our Lord. If you were to say that our Lord gives you great desires of serving Him, you would be giving praise to the same Lord because you are making known His gift, and your glory in Him, not in yourself, because you do not attribute that grace to yourself. (Letters Ign: 7)<sup>19</sup>

In order to enter into the Spiritual Exercises fruitfully, a strong desire or attraction towards God, which is itself a divine grace, must already be present in the retreatant. At each point in the Exercises the retreatant will be exhorted to ask for what I desire; the *id quod volo*.<sup>20</sup> As the Exercises progress, the interior desires of the retreatant should become increasingly resonant with the graces sought in each of the ‘Weeks.’<sup>21</sup>

The opening movement of the Spiritual Exercises is known as the Principle and Foundation. In the text it occurs at the beginning of the First Week. The 1599 Directory describes the Principle and Foundation as “the groundwork of the whole moral and spiritual edifice” of the Exercises.<sup>22</sup> The Principle and Foundation is the distillation of Ignatius’s mystical experiences during his time at Manresa. Although, in the text of the Exercises, the Principle and Foundation appears as a single exercise, it contains Ignatius’s “vision of reality in relation to God’s creative and salvific plan” (Ivens 1998: 28). The Principle and Foundation” establishes the basis and contains, in highly compressed form, the themes and dynamics of the entire Exercises.” (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 89).

The genuine dynamism of the exercises is that of this desire which gives rise to prayerful search, and which divine grace comes to purify and to open, the desire to open up to all the lights revealed through God’s salvific plan (Cusson 1988:127).

An appropriation of the Principle and Foundation is critical to the experience of making the Exercises as without at least some felt grasp of its themes, in particular

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<sup>19</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, Saint. Letters of Ignatius of Loyola. Young, W. J. (ed). (Chicago: Loyola University Press. 1959).

<sup>20</sup> A key Ignatian term which translates into English as “that which I desire.”

<sup>21</sup> A “Week’ is a stage in the process of the Exercises which contain four ‘Weeks.’ These do not correspond to a week in chronological time.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Palmer (editor and translator) 1986. On Giving the Spiritual Exercises. The Early Jesuit manuscript directories and the official directory of 1599. St Louis. Institute of Jesuit Sources p. 311

God's creative and redeeming love, the retreatant cannot profitably continue the Exercises. Tetlow (1989) describes the Principle and Foundation as "a profound, felt awareness of "being created momentarily by our God and Lord in all our concrete particulars" (Tetlow 1989:7 in Dyckman Garvin and Liebert 2001: 90). The Principle and Foundation is also about growing in Ignatian "indifference" which is freedom from those inordinate attachments which might limit the retreatant's capacity to choose what will "better lead to God's deepening life" (Sp. Exx: 23) in him or her.

The First Week of the Exercises arises out of the experience of the Principle and Foundation. The retreatant is to come to know him or herself as a sinner deeply loved by God. Having experienced the power of God's creative and salvific plan and the ongoing and sustaining love of God, the retreatant is confronted with the reality of his/her lack of response to that loving invitation to collaboration with God. The meditations move from situating sin in our human history and condition in the meditations of *The Sin of the Angels* (Sp. Exx: 50) and *The Sin of Adam and Eve* (Sp. Exx: 51) to contemplating the effects of sin in the life of a single person who has rejected God's love, and finally to seeing oneself as sinful, broken and yet deeply and unconditionally loved by God.

This realisation and the joy and freedom which it brings, opens the way for the retreatant to meditate on God's call in his/her particular life situation. In the meditation of *The Call of the King* the retreatant is invited to respond with generosity to the invitation to follow Christ. This meditation also begins the Second Week of the Exercises and the "election" process of coming to discover God's specific invitation to the retreatant. The retreatant is invited, primarily through the use of imaginative prayer<sup>23</sup>, to accompany Jesus in his life and ministry and to allow his/ her life to be illuminated through coming to know Jesus more intimately. This intimate knowledge (*connaissance intime*) is stressed by Francois Varillon (1980) as critical to the Exercises journey. Ignatius writes, "For it is not knowing much, but realizing and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies the soul." (Sp. Exx: 2).

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<sup>23</sup> Gospel Contemplation is a method of praying with scripture in which the retreatant with the use of imagination places herself in a particular Gospel story using her senses and allows her story to intersect with that of the Gospel passage. The use of Gospel Contemplation will be discussed in depth in the thesis as a means by which profound changes in image of God are facilitated.

Interspersed with the contemplations on the life of Jesus, are the so-called Key Meditations of the Second Week which have as their purpose further clarifying obstacles or attachments so that the election can be made from a place of the greatest possible spiritual freedom. Although I will argue the majority of women making the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat in South Africa are not making “classic” election retreats, the election is the moment towards which, in Ignatius’s classic method, the Principle and Foundation and the First and Second Week are geared. The election is also that which is then tested in the Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises which engage the retreatant in the contemplation of the passion and resurrection of Jesus. The retreatant, having made the choice to stand with Christ in the *Two Standards* meditation now accompanies Jesus into his passion. The choice of radical discipleship leads to contemplation of the cost of discipleship, and ultimately to sharing in Christ’s resurrection. The Exercises ends with the *Contemplation to Attain Divine Love* that mirrors the Principle and Foundation meditation.

### **2.1.6 Early Jesuit practice in giving the Spiritual Exercises**

The giving of the Exercises began in the context of Ignatius giving them to his friends and fellow-students including Frances Xavier and Peter Favre who were among the first members of the Company of Jesus. It seems that Ignatius considered the individual’s own experience of making the Exercises to be the basis from which he or she could start to give them.

As far back as 1591 there is a differentiation between how the Exercises were to be given to Jesuits and how they might be given to others. This seems to indicate that the distinction between Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit spirituality is already being noted, although, at this stage, lay experience remains unarticulated (Endean 2001a: 47). Most of the early writing on how the Exercises were given reflect an understandable emphasis on the experience of developing and nurturing a specifically Jesuit spirituality. The writings that deal with the giving of the Exercises focus on

specifically Jesuit spirituality.<sup>24</sup> According to Endean “once the ministry of the Exercises outside the Society became a matter of routine, it was not written about” (Endean 2001: 48). This means that there is something of a gap if we look back in history to try to understand questions about application of the Exercises in our own contexts.

Before the Company of Jesus sought to regulate the formation of novices with the Thirty Day enclosed retreat, historical records suggest that the practice of giving of the Exercises was very flexible. We know from historical records at the time of Jerome Nadal, that the Exercises were applied with considerable flexibility depending the situation and needs of the individual novice making them. Endean asserts that we need to be conscious that the history of giving the Exercises that we have inherited is biased towards addressing those issues that were specifically Jesuit concerns.

“As we apply the Exercises we are also developing them” (Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: Preamble 134.5 in Endean 2001a: 59). In the past few years there has been discussion about the terms ‘to adapt’ or ‘to apply’ the Exercises. Endean makes a strong case for translating the Spanish *aplicar* as meaning to *apply* the exercises. The idea of adaptation, the result of inaccurate translation, implies adulteration of the ‘ideal process’ necessary or justifiable as a result of the particular circumstances with which one is faced. Applying the Exercises implies instead a thorough understanding of the process, such that one is able to use it in each circumstance to the best possible effect. “To apply the Exercises is to enhance them” (Endean 2001a: 44).

Endean argues that in Annotation 18,

Ignatius is not encouraging us to produce a simplified alternative to his text, standing alongside it permanently, but rather constantly to keep representing the text we have in ever different ways, responsive to the

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Endean, Applying such Exercises. Early Jesuit Practice. In *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* (Rome: Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality 2001). In this article Endean cites the first two works of Ignacio Ippaguirre: *Practica de los Ejercicios de San Ignacio de Loyola en vida de su autor. 1522-1556*. Rome. Jesuit Historical Institute. Historia 1 and Historia 2. He also cites Joseph de Guibert’s *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice*. (Translated by William Young. Edited by George. E. Ganss, St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources. 1986).

person receiving the process (Endean 2001: 44-45)... .“At the heart of Ignatius’s applicar is a sense of reverence for how God’s Spirit can be at work in the person one meets, in ways that may in principle be surprising, unpredictable and new (Endean 2001: 46).

Lonsdale (1990) also emphasizes the importance of applying the Exercises to a modern (and now post-modern) context. He argues that naively striving for literal fidelity to and application of the text is in fact unfaithful to what Ignatius’s intentions.

Many of Ignatius’s categories of thought and expression, including much of his theology, are foreign to a modern person and would not help or sustain his spiritual growth if we reproduced them literally. The opposite temptation lies in sitting so easy to the Exercises that what we give ceases to be recognizable as Ignatian Exercises at all (Lonsdale 1990: 112).

There is always a tension between fidelity to the text and the dynamic of the Exercises and to their application to each individual. As Sheldrake notes:

In such a delicately balanced text as Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* the purpose, which is to aid a movement towards inner freedom before God, is closely associated with the way that the text is organized. This does not exclude a creative approach to the text but we need to know how it works before deciding, in particular situations, to vary the given structure (Sheldrake 1991:178).

### **2.1.7 Ignatius’s text and current practice**

Ignatius suggests that the Spiritual Exercises may be made in a variety of different ways to accommodate the desires, needs and personal circumstances of the individual retreatant. In Annotations 18-20 he describes three broad possibilities for making the Exercises. Annotation 20 Exercises (which for a long period in the history of the Exercises came to be viewed as the optimal approach) were to be made in seclusion over a period of approximately 30 days. It is difficult to know with certainty whether Ignatius himself thought of this way of making the Exercises as the preferred way. He seems however to imply that this is the case in Annotation 20, writing:

to him who is more disengaged, and who desires to get *all the profit he can*, let all the Spiritual Exercises be given in the order in which they follow. In these he will, ordinarily, *more benefit himself* the more he

separates himself from all friends and acquaintances and from all earthly cares...(Sp. Exx: 20).

He specifies three advantages of this approach, the first being the gift to God that this sacrifice involves, and the second of not being distracted by other concerns and the third that the response we make can be more intense and intimate because loving him is our only focus. (Sp. Exx: 20)<sup>25</sup>

However Ignatius also envisaged that there would be those who, while desiring to make the Full Exercises, could not leave their responsibilities entirely for the period of a month. He proposed that the same process could be followed over a longer period of time as a retreat in daily life (Sp. Exx: 19). For those who do not have the innate capacity or desire to make the Full Exercises, Ignatius suggested other simpler methods of helping the person grow in his/her relationship with God.

The Spiritual Exercises have to be adapted to the dispositions of the persons who wish to receive them, that is, to their age, intelligence, education or ability, in order not to give to one who is uneducated or of little intelligence things he cannot easily bear or profit by (Sp. Exx: 18).

Margaret Skinnader (1984), who gives Spiritual Exercises to people with very little education in housing estates in Glasgow, challenges this notion. She claims that in her experience very ordinary, uneducated people who have a great desire for God can fruitfully make the Full Exercises in Daily Life in the manner of the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation.

There can be no doubt that the Exercises of St Ignatius are being applied in many different ways world-wide. Joseph Tetlow (2000) describes the shift that has taken place over the last thirty years in the way in which the Exercises are made. Just over thirty years ago, only Jesuits gave the Exercises and only (some) religious made them, almost always in the enclosed setting of a residential retreat house over a period of thirty days. Now the Exercises are being made not only by clergy and religious but also by lay men and women of various Christian denominations, and even those of no

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<sup>25</sup> Translation by Fleming, F. *Draw me into your Friendship. A literal translation and a contemporary reading of the Spiritual Exercises*. St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources. 1996.

religious affiliation. Lay men and women are also giving the Exercises, something that would have been virtually unheard of only 20 years ago.<sup>26</sup>

During the time in which there were large numbers of Jesuit novices needing to make the Spiritual Exercises the Exercises had come to be given in groups in a preached format of four talks a day on the themes of the Exercises. In the seventies and eighties people including Paul Kennedy and Gerard Hughes in the UK and John English in Canada began to reclaim the individually directed retreat from the Ignatian heritage. Liebert says of that period “these first directed retreats were a reclamation of Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises and very shortly became a seedbed for training a whole cadre of spiritual directors” (Liebert 2003: 44).

There are different expectations among experienced directors of the Exercises as to what might be experienced by a retreatant depending on the kind of Exercises made. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation (Full Exercises in Daily Life) and in the 20<sup>th</sup> Annotation (enclosed thirty-day retreat format), there is generally an expectation that the directee will have been led into a deeper, more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and that some vital life choice or renewal of life choice will be made.

Due to a large degree to the opening up of the Spiritual Exercises to the laity, the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat (Full Exercises in Daily Life) is rapidly becoming the method of choice in many places. Very few lay people can afford to take 30-days away from family and work responsibilities and the cost of such a retreat is prohibitive for most. As numbers of religious have fallen dramatically in many parts of the world well-known residential centres which offer the Spiritual Exercises in the 30-day format, such as St Beuno’s in North Wales, no longer find it easy to fill places on 30-day retreats. As the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation has been used more widely, its advantages have become more evident.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat, which is the focus of this study, is made over a period of nine to fifteen months (depending on the individual). In that time, the retreatant has

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<sup>26</sup> This is still the case in virtually all parts of Africa except South Africa. I established this at a conference of directors of Jesuit Retreat Houses and Centres in Africa held in Ethiopia in 2007.

the opportunity to integrate the fruits of the retreat process in his or her daily life. There is not the sense of a ‘mountain-top’ experience that may or may not withstand the return from the retreat centre to the vicissitudes of everyday life. In the African context the use of the Nineteenth Annotation format as the method of choice for making the Full Exercises may go beyond the very real practical considerations which would rule out the 30-day approach for most. In African culture all of life is permeated with the spiritual. “For Africans, all problems that touch body and soul need to be dealt with together. If I come to you with my problem I need to see it not dealt with in isolation but in relation to all the other aspects of my life” (Mdluli 1995: 29).

### **2.1.8 Ignatius’s text and current practice**

The way in which the Exercises are given in practice, is in part a function of how the director views the text. Fr Kolvenbach, the immediate past General of the Society of Jesus speaks<sup>27</sup> of the dynamic interplay between four actors: God, Ignatius (or the text), the one giving the Exercises and the one receiving them. There are certainly directors who would cling to literal fidelity to the text in an attempt to ensure that the full dynamic of the retreat takes place. However, as Barry and Connolly in their training programs for directors of the Exercises emphasise,<sup>28</sup> the dynamic is not in the text but in the person. Certainly in considering how Ignatius and his contemporaries in fact gave the Exercises, the guiding principle is always what will best serve the retreatant in the deepening of their relationship with God.

In response to the question “What counts as authentically Ignatian?” Endean describes a tension between fidelity to the text and to the needs of the individual retreatant. He suggests that “Any ignatian procedure must be open both to the text and to the possibility that the God whose Spirit gave rise to the text may be performing a new deed as a new retreatant encounters it” (Endean 1998: 40). The director must bring

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<sup>27</sup> I was present at a conference of Jesuit-lay collaboration in February 2002 in Rome at which Fr Kolvenbach presented this view as a paper.

<sup>28</sup> Conversation June 2005 with Sr. Deirdre Harman a Loreto sister and well-known Ignatian spiritual director in South Africa, a former participant of Barry and Connolly’s training programme for spiritual directors.

both a deep understanding of the interior movements which the sequence of meditations and contemplations suggested by Ignatius should effect and a deep sensitivity to the needs and desires of the particular retreatant. Gagliardi also warns in his commentary against the notion that the Exercises can or should be given in a standardized manner. He writes:

They err who want to tie those receiving the Exercises to what they have experienced within themselves, or to that to which they themselves have been called and impelled. They fail to notice that this is the plague and perversion of this art; this is to tie God down, and impose on God a law whereby God should act with another soul as God has done with theirs, whereas most often something very different is appropriate for it, both because of the soul's capacity, and of how the divine good pleasure is executed. Therefore they must abstract from themselves, and accommodating to the soul's receptivity, put forward those rules from the book which are appropriate for it (Gagliardi in Endean 2001a: 57).

As the Exercises are made available to different kinds of people of different cultures and denominational backgrounds, their experience “throws new light on the text, enabling us to see significances in it previously hidden from us” (Endean 1998: 36). I believe that this is indeed the case and that listening to the experience of African women making the Exercises may enhance our understanding and appreciation of the Exercises. “In pastoral contexts unimaginable to the early Jesuits, we are discovering meanings and potentials in the text of which no-one in the sixteenth century could have dreamt” (Endean 2001a: 59). Structuralist literary criticism has made us aware that the interpretation of texts is an on-going and dialogical process in which the text is interrogated by readers who will bring to it the questions of their own time and experience. This is particularly true of what Tracy calls the ‘classic text,’ which resists definitive interpretation, the criteria for which are certainly met by the text of the Exercises (Tracy 1981). Francois Varillon, (1980) a highly regarded French giver of the Exercises, claims that while in some respects the text of the Exercises may seem theologically dated, the deepening of theology over time allows for a deepening of the Exercises. Gerald West in his book *Contextual Bible Study* outlines three different approaches to reading the Biblical text which can also be applied our approach to the Spiritual Exercises. Among these is the approach of reading “in front of the text”. In this understanding the meaning of the text is not static but dynamic. It is able to respond to new questions or situations.

Even though this mode of reading recognizes that the meanings of the text are in some sense derived from the historical and sociological world of those who produced it, the focus of this mode of reading is not on what the text meant in the past but on what it means for the present (and future). The meaning of a text is not restricted to what it meant for the past but also includes what it means for the present, whether those who produced the text were conscious of this present meaning or not (West 1993: 43).

This idea of bringing new questions to the text is naturally much more powerful when the text is not engaged with on the level of reading alone, but on the level of prayer. On this level the retreatant dialogues with God, and explicitly seeks to engage with the scriptural passages and the questions posed by Ignatius in the text. Therefore one wonders do African women bring different questions to this text? What are those questions? What answers to those questions does engagement with the text as prayer bring? In applying and adapting the Exercises for women in our diverse South African culture we need to discover what desires, experiences and needs they bring to the process. “In significant ways, Ignatius’ exercitants contributed to the text we have. We should receive that text as an invitation to continue the process” (Endean 2001a: 58).

## **2.2 THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND WOMEN**

### **2.2.1 The Spiritual Exercises and the experience of women**

Not only do we need to consider the new questions brought to the text by people of different cultural backgrounds, but current work on the Exercises is beginning to examine the experience of women making the Exercises. Although in most places women are now more represented than men, both as exercitants and as retreat givers, there is still very little articulation of women’s experience of making the Exercises. In the notes to the preface of their seminal text, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed. Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*, Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001: xiv) point out that in a 1991 English-language bibliography on the Spiritual Exercises fewer than five percent of the works on the Spiritual Exercises were authored or co-

authored by women. While this is slowly changing with some articles on the Exercises and on Discernment authored by women appearing more frequently in spiritual journals such as *The Way* and *Presence*, aside from the work of Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) there is still no substantial literature specifically exploring the experience of women making the Exercises.

Dyckman, Gavin and Liebert seek to explore the experiences of women making the Exercises and to use women's experience as a hermeneutical key for understanding the dynamic of the Exercises. They argue that not only are women impoverished when their experience of the Exercises is not given attention but that men are also deprived of the richness of the difference of that experience (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: x).

Ruffing (2000) in her work *Spiritual Direction beyond the Beginnings* questions whether in fact the conversion dynamic which the Exercises seeks to elicit, follows the same sequence of emerging desires in women as that suggested in the text.

Insights of feminist psychology, which includes the work such authors as Gilligan (1980) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldburger and Tarule (1986) suggest that women generally construct their identity differently from men with more emphasis on relationality. These questions will be further examined both in the course of this chapter and in the light of what emerges from the interviews with women directees who engage in the Exercises in the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation format.

### **2.2.2 Historical Background: The Spiritual Exercises and women**

It is clear from Ignatius's letters to women<sup>29</sup>, that even in his own time women were making the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life. Many of his letters are letters of spiritual direction to women some of whom had made the full Exercises. Ignatius appears not to have had a simple relationship with women. Although Ignatius had many significant relationships with women these relationships reveal a marked ambivalence

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<sup>29</sup> See Hugo Rahner's *Ignatius's letters to Women*. Trans.Kathleen Pond and S.A.H. Weetman. (New York: Herder KG, 1960).

towards them. Women played pivotal roles both in the early life of Ignatius and in the time of his establishment of the Society of Jesus. Historical documents including *The Autobiography* and his voluminous correspondence reveal that Ignatius engaged extensively in dialogue with women from all classes of society. The story of these women, some of whom were very closely connected with Ignatius and the early Society of Jesus, has not been explored in depth, possibly as understandably most of the writings on the Society were written by Jesuits, all of whom were writing from their male perspective.<sup>30</sup> Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) reflect that we know very little about the impact of women on the early development of the Exercises and that this is problematic. They devote a chapter of their book on women and the Exercises to examining some of the little-acknowledged involvement and influence of women in the process of the development of the Spiritual Exercises.

From his infancy, women played significant roles in the life of Ignatius. Although his mother died soon after his birth, the wife of the local blacksmith, Maria Grain, acted as his wet-nurse and in that early nurturing role must undoubtedly have been a key influence in his psychological development (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 29). Magdalena, de Araoz, wife of one of Ignatius's older brothers, became the lady of the house at the castle in Loyola when Ignatius was seven. It was she who introduced Ignatius to Ludolph of Saxony's *Life of Christ* and de Voraigue's<sup>31</sup> *Legends of the Saints* while he was convalescing after the battle in Pamplona. One may speculate that she and Ignatius may have had conversations about the books Ignatius was reading while she was nursing him. She may have played a significant role in his conversion and spiritual development even beyond giving him these books which had so powerful an influence on the course of his life.

After his conversion Ignatius came into contact with many women from all classes of society. They played different roles. Some acted as generous benefactors, financing

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<sup>30</sup> There are some exceptions. See for example Lisa Fullham's "Juana SJ.: The Past (and Future)? Status of Women in the Society of Jesus." 1999 in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*. 31. Rome: Monograph published by the Society of Jesus.

<sup>31</sup> The spelling of this name as either de Voraigue or de Voragine is evident in the published literature. There was a Latin edition assigned to approximately 1469 and an edition which was published in Lyon in 1473 which may account for this.

Ignatius's studies and apostolic endeavours. Some were partners in apostolic ministry, for example the women who founded and worked in the House of St Martha. We know that women including Dona Teresa de Cardenas visited Ignatius in jail at Alcala and campaigned to have him released. At least once Ignatius's life was saved by women who found him in the chapel, almost unconscious as a result of his excesses in prayer and fasting, and who nursed him back to health. (Segarra Pijuan 1992: 96 in Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 32).

A number of women who made the Spiritual Exercises wanted to become Jesuits. Isabel Roser, a woman of Catalan nobility, appealed to the Pope to put pressure on Ignatius to allow her to make vows in the Society. Roser and her two companions, Lucezia di Brandone and Francisca Cruyllas entered the Society on Christmas Day 1547. She had supported Ignatius to the extent that she has been described as "his greatest benefactor in Barcelona, Paris and Venice" (de Dalmases 1985: 72 in Dyckman et al 2001: 37). Ignatius clearly recognizes this in an early letter to Roser in which he expresses his gratitude writing, "for to you I owe more than to anyone I know in this life" (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 37). However the relationship between Roser and Ignatius became strained after she had joined the Society and Ignatius later sought and received permission from the pope to release her from her vows.

One sees clearly in the correspondence between Ignatius and Roser a relational tension. Ignatius was her confessor and spiritual director and as such there would probably have been a strong transference relationship and certainly an unequal power dynamic. Isabel Roser appears from her letters to be a strong and dynamic woman with a clear conviction that she was called to be a Jesuit. Her battle with Ignatius over this issue is difficult for her to fight perhaps because of her deep affection and esteem for him and because of the key role he played in her spiritual life. It would appear that this put her in a position of emotional vulnerability. One observes that following a great deal of pain and acrimony over the issue of her dismissal from the Society (which she fought vehemently), she goes to Ignatius for confession and seemingly

follows the advice given by him as confessor to enter a convent. (Rahner: 1960).<sup>32</sup> One might have thought that Ignatius should be the last person Roser should turn to for counsel, given what had transpired between them, but the dynamic of the relationship is such that she instinctively looks to him for guidance.

Juana of Spain was another woman who by virtue of her royalty held a position of great political influence. She took vows secretly as a Jesuit, under the alias Mateo Sanchez, and exerted her considerable political influence in support of the Society of Jesus. She was the only woman to die a Jesuit. It is interesting that the early Society of Jesus realized that such was her influence that they dared not refuse to admit her to the Society. She used that influence in the service of the Society and was according to Meissner, “a great defender of the Society in controversies” (Meissner 1992: 250 in Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 40).

Teresa Rajadell, a noblewoman living as a religious in the Benedictine convent of Santa Clara, came under the spiritual direction of Ignatius. Through a substantial correspondence between the two Ignatius encouraged and assisted her in her deepening relationship with God. According to Hugo Rahner Ignatius’ first letter of spiritual direction to Teresa is something of “a commentary on the Spiritual Exercises especially on the fundamental experiences of the Saint at Loyola and Manresa, and on the doctrine about the influence of good and evil spirits” (Rahner 1960: 330). One may wonder about the significance of the role of Teresa Rajadell, whose detailed letters and requests for spiritual counsel on specific matters concerning prayer and life may well have helped Ignatius to further crystallize and articulate the fruits of his own spiritual experience.

Despite Ignatius’s willingness to give in-depth spiritual direction to Teresa it would appear that, as in most of his other relationships with women, that when their desire for God and for his service meant that the women sought to imitate the Jesuit way of life or to demand the on-going spiritual support of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius panicked and withdrew his support. In response to Ignatius’s earlier encouragement,

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<sup>32</sup> This collection of letters from Ignatius to women was compiled by Hugo Rahner, brother of the more well – known Karl Rahner.

Teresa and her sisters wanted to place themselves under obedience to Ignatius. Despite their obtaining funding from supportive family and friends and acquiring a property for the convent, and having gained the support of the Jesuit provincial of Spain, Ignatius was not willing to involve the Society.

In May 1547, Ignatius petitioned Pope Paul III to free the Jesuits for all time from the spiritual direction of women who, living together as a community, wished to place themselves under the obedience of the priests of the Society of Jesus” (Rahner 1960:290 in Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 43).

One of the difficulties of the time was that all women religious had to live a cloistered life. Ignatius was concerned that taking on the spiritual direction of women religious might place limits on the mobility and availability of the Jesuits. However, it seems that Ignatius was conflicted about the issue of women’s involvement. Reites notes that Ignatius did not seem adverse to the notion of an apostolic order of women. In 1546 Ignatius wrote,

I am convinced that to win more souls and to serve God our Lord better and more comprehensively in the cause of spiritual advancement, it would be a good and holy means to found a company of women, which others too, having been found suitable in the Lord could join (Reites 1992: 15).

The reluctance of the Society of Jesus at certain points in its history to give women access to the Full Exercises is reflected in the stance of the early General of the Society Claudius Aquiviva. In 1600 he wrote to the Rhineland provincial saying:

We have already written on many other occasions that it doesn’t seem to be worth the trouble to give these Exercises to women. It is enough if our people leave them with some spiritual books and recommend that they read them. At most you could teach them some method of prayer on their own in church and give them some points for meditation that are more suitable for them (Iparraguirre quoted by Endean 2001: 49).

Despite the opposition to their involvement beyond a certain point, there were clearly women at the time of Ignatius for whom making the Exercises was a transformative experience.

Women desired more participation than allowed by culture, church and the Society of Jesus, deeply sensing a call to “more.” Nonetheless, women’s relationships with Ignatius and the early members of the Society vividly revealed the presence and power of God laboring in the worlds of women through their spiritual conversation and apostolic action (Dyckman et al 2001: 45).

Support in recent years by the Society of Jesus for women to make and give the Spiritual Exercises has been made explicit, thus recognizing and affirming in policy the reality of the overwhelming increase in women’s involvement in this ministry. Decree Fourteen of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, entitled *Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society* states:

Religious and lay women have in recent years become expert in the giving of the Spiritual Exercises. As retreat directors, especially of the Exercises in Daily Life, they have enriched the Ignatian Tradition, and our own understanding of ourselves and of our ministry. Many women have helped to reshape our theological tradition in a way that has liberated both men and women (GC 34: 1995. Decree 14 paragraph 10).

Collaboration between Jesuits and women in the ministry of the Spiritual Exercises has increasingly become a reality over the past twenty years. In some countries including the Philippines,<sup>33</sup> South Africa, and Australia, Scotland and now England<sup>34</sup> women head Jesuit Retreat Centres. It is equally true that these days many women who give and receive the Spiritual Exercises are embedded within contexts and communities who have no links with the Society of Jesus or with other congregations which have an Ignatian charism.<sup>35</sup> The Society of Jesus is no longer the sole custodian of the Spiritual Exercises.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In the Phillipines Eva Galvey, a laywoman heads up a large Jesuit Retreat House and Formation Centre. There are a number of Jesuits on the team.

<sup>34</sup> As of Sept 2008 Ruth Holgate a laywoman has been appointed director of the well-known Jesuit retreat house Loyola Hall in Liverpool, UK.

<sup>35</sup> In the South African context during the 1990’s the Exercises had been handed on within a certain sector of the Methodist community. Those most recently trained were unaware of the fact that Ignatius was also the founder of the Society of Jesus.

<sup>36</sup> The February 2002 Consultation in Rome convened by the Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality, a gathering of Jesuits and laity from all continents officially recognized this to be the case.

### 2.2.3 The South African experience: An historical overview

In South Africa up until about fifteen years ago the Spiritual Exercises were given almost solely by Jesuits and some Loreto sisters to religious of their own congregations. Some of the Ignatian methods of prayer were passed on to laity by Jesuits at their school St Aidan's in Grahamstown and in the parishes in which they served as parish priests. Xolile Keteyi, a black South African Jesuit who died in 1994, clearly taught the youth at St Martin de Porres parish in Soweto and youth from the Catholic parish in Kathlehong the Ignatian methods of Examen of Consciousness and Gospel Contemplation. When the Centre for Ignatian Spirituality began to work with young adults in these parishes, they recognised these methods as "the spirituality Keteyi shared with us."<sup>37</sup>

In the mid 1990's, following the sudden burgeoning of Ignatian directed retreats and the involvement of laity in places like the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom there were isolated instances of lay women being offered the Full Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life in South Africa. Some basic training, drawing in part on the Ignatian tradition, were offered by a number of individuals. Trevor Hudson, a Methodist Minister, together with an Anglican priest, Fr Michael Faure, and Notre Dame Sister, Kay Bridges, held an introductory training course in Spiritual Accompaniment in 1997 at Kempton Park Methodist Church.

In 1996 a team from Llys Fasi in Wales, which included the well-known author of *God of Surprises* Gerry Hughes SJ came to South Africa to conduct an ecumenical workshop in spiritual direction. This led to a number of follow-up workshops that were eventually facilitated solely by a South African team. This venture was linked with the Centre for Christian Spirituality in Cape Town. The Centre offers spiritual direction and retreats of various kinds as well as training in spiritual accompaniment. Its focus however has been on Christian Spirituality broadly and the Exercises of St Ignatius are not emphasized.

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<sup>37</sup> Comment by young adults at St Martin de Porres Parish Soweto May 2003.

With the establishment of The Centre for Ignatian Spirituality in 1999 in Johannesburg,<sup>38</sup> under the direction of a team of laywomen, and funded by the Society of Jesus in South Africa, training programmes were established specifically to train givers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Exercises.

From 2000 a shorter training programme (Prayer Guide Training) has been offered each year in Johannesburg and surrounding areas including Tshwane and the East Rand for those training to give 18<sup>th</sup> Annotation Exercises such as Weeks of Guided Prayer<sup>39</sup> or Open Door Retreats.<sup>40</sup> The long training for givers of 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreats requires participants to have made the Full Spiritual Exercises themselves. At the time of writing the course is weekly over eighteen months or monthly over two years. Those who participate in the course take a retreatant through the process of the Exercises under close supervision, and then join an on-going supervision group.<sup>41</sup> Those who have made the Exercises in South Africa have tended to be female, white and middle-class, of varying denominational backgrounds. This is changing as the Centre reaches more people in township parishes, who express the desire ‘for more of this way of praying.’ (Participant St Martin de Porres Parish, Soweto. July 2001). It will also change as more black directors of the Exercises are trained.

A project by the Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality in 2000 drew together a meeting of experienced givers of the Exercises to reflect on current practices. This group reported that among those making the Exercises today are people from a wide range of cultures. “The Exercises are inculturated for the indigenous peoples of Central America and for the postchristians of Central Europe” (Tetlow 2000: 11).

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<sup>38</sup> Since January 2007 incorporated into The Jesuit Institute-South Africa

<sup>39</sup> Weeks of Guided Prayer are a form of parish retreat in daily life.

<sup>40</sup> Open Door Retreats consist of a programme of weekly group meetings over nine weeks. The process broadly follows the Ignatian dynamic.

<sup>41</sup> Supervision groups enable the giver of the Exercises to consult with more experienced directors while guarding the confidentiality of the individual to whom the Exercises are being given. They also provide an opportunity for the director to talk about his/her own feelings which may have been evoked in the process of directing the other.

The Exercises are beginning to be offered to lay women in the South African context. In the last eight years approximately forty lay women have made the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat through the Centre for Ignatian Spirituality. Most of these women however are from a white, middle-aged, middle class demographic. To date as far as I have been able to ascertain only five black women in South Africa have made the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation. In part this is because the Exercises have only recently been made accessible in townships. There are also serious questions about how the Exercises need to be inculcated in order to connect with the experience of black women.<sup>42</sup> In other parts of Africa however virtually no laywomen are making the full 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Spiritual Exercises.<sup>43</sup> In these countries they are being made predominantly by women religious. It is hoped that the laywomen who have made the Exercises in South Africa in the last ten years and who share their experience in this research will be able to help us to deepen our understanding of the Exercises.

#### **2.2.4 Women's relationship with the Exercises as text and process**

In an article entitled *An Option for Women*, Ruffing and Moser argue that those directing women in the Spiritual Exercises need to be aware of the ways in which women may be alienated or oppressed by certain metaphors and images in the text of Exercises.

Women have been so wounded by the use of religious texts which maintain their oppression and disempowerment that directors need to be alert to the ways women have internalized these interpretations in self-defeating and dehumanizing ways (Ruffing and Moser 1992:96).

The masculine language and imagery of Ignatius's text has presented difficulties for some women who find it alienating. Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) describe the difficulties many women have with issues such as a male saviour and with a church structure which is oppressive to women. However, they argue that despite the

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<sup>42</sup> Research is currently being done in this area in Soweto by the Jesuit Institute-South Africa

<sup>43</sup> In June 2007 I attended the first ever meeting of directors of Jesuit Spirituality Centres and Retreat Houses in Africa. Sixteen countries were represented. I asked each of the directors of the countries represented whether laywomen in their countries were making the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat. The answer was that laywomen were not yet making the Exercises.

difficulties presented by the masculine imagery in the text, the Spiritual Exercises remain a potentially liberating source and experience for women. They describe five aspects of the Exercises which, in their experience, have been liberating for women.

1) The value of the human experience of God shared with another; 2) the value of a spirituality of the whole person; 3) the value of a spirituality grounded in scripture, the value of prayer in life; of contemplation in action; and 5) the value of adaptability and flexibility as signs of authentic spirituality (Dyckman et al 2001: 4.)

They highlight the importance of sharing one's story in the process of the Exercises, as a way of recognising the belonging to a community of shared experience. In the situation of African women it may be that the opposite is the case, and that the Exercises help the woman to claim and value her own distinctive experience.

Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001), describe a growing body of feminist interpretation of scripture which can facilitate the liberating use of scripture in the Exercises. Their exploration of what is liberating for women in the Exercises is however grounded in the experiences of North American women. This thesis seeks to explore the liberating potential of the Exercises for African women. For African women there is often a strong sense that simply the experience that the words of scripture can be God responding directly to their situation, is both revolutionary and liberating. Particularly in the townships where few people have been exposed in any way to scriptural prayer and come predominantly out of an experience of set prayers such as the novena and the rosary prayed in community, (often in sodalities or at section meetings),<sup>44</sup> the experience that in reflecting on the scriptures they can hear what God is saying to them is exciting.<sup>45</sup> There is the sense that God cares about them as an individual, not only as part of the community, and that God's words have power in the present.

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<sup>44</sup> Many parishes in the townships are divided into a number of geographical areas. The parishioners who fall into a given geographical area are invited to attend a weekly prayer meeting, which is hosted in someone's home on a rotational basis. These meetings at which there is usually either preaching on a text by a lay person in the group or saying the rosary together are known as section meetings.)

<sup>45</sup> This insight comes from my experience of teaching Ignatian prayer methods to women from St Martin de Porres parish in Soweto and from listening to them describe their experiences in spiritual direction.

### 2.2.5 Women's experience of the Exercises dynamic: The importance of desire

From the first line of the *Principle and Foundation* the exercitant is confronted with a God who desires them and who creates them to desire God's self. The *id quod volo* - that which I desire - is fundamental to the Ignatian Exercises but can be seen before the Exercises begin as the energy which draws the person to search for a relationship with God. From birth human beings are created with the capacity for relationship, and theologically for relationship with God. There is an innate orientation towards relationship with God.

In sum, the dynamism of desire means that every human being is *a creature*, that every one of you *has been set in motion towards your end*, that the action of the Holy Spirit follows the *bent of your being, orientating you along the natural path of desire*. And so, you respond to that need you feel *in the depths of your being*, where each of you experiences *the deepest movement of a created being, and the whole natural thrust of a human being* (Connor 2006: 4).

Throughout the Spiritual Exercises, the exercitant is asked to beg for 'that which I desire.' As previously noted, desire is the energy which unfolds the conversion dynamic of the Exercises. In the case of women, one needs to be aware that the authentic desires of the woman may not be readily accessible, that they may have to be excavated from the imposed or adopted desires overlain by societal expectations of a woman's role. In considering the importance of naming and owning one's one deep desires as key to the Principle and Foundation, Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) address the external critical voices of church and society which frequently make it extremely difficult for women to get in touch with their own authentic desires. The fact that many South African cultures are highly patriarchal exacerbates this problem.

Women have traditionally not been encouraged to acknowledge and articulate their desires.

Many a woman's deep desires are buried so deep as to be almost totally concealed from any form of access at all, either on her own part or that of the director. For years she will have been asked to put other people and their preferences first (Byrne 1992: 38).

Part of the liberating power of the Exercises may be the way in which the process enables the woman to begin to acknowledge and articulate her own desires. It may be that for many women this process in fact is the most significant work of the Exercises because of the way in which it serves as a powerful corrective for the socialization which tends to make women increasingly unaware of their own desires as they focus their attention on the desires of others:

Integral to this process is the discovery of the convergence between the authentic desires of the woman and God's desires for her.

In the phenomenology of desire with its intricate links to the will-lies a hidden treasure which will demystify discernment as a search in the haystack for the golden strand of God's will to an understanding that "God's will" is a meshing of God's desire and my desire (Rakoczy 1995: 3).

Janet Ruffing gives attention to this issue of desire and its implications for the process and dynamic experienced by woman in the Exercises. She suggests that the key difference in women's experience of the Exercises dynamic may be a difference in the particular desires which women bring to the process (Ruffing 2000: 16).

In the Exercises,

The sequence of desires is also expressed in the metaphors typical of masculine consciousness, which is shaped by the hero's journey and begins with heroic ideals and quests and ends in intimacy in the latter stages. Women's process is a little more complex. For many women life is in the details rather than in the heroic dream. Desire for women is frequently related to intimate relating. Their desires may or may not be particularly heroic in tone (Ruffing 2000: 24).

Ruffing contrasts the sequence of desires to be prayed for, as laid out by Ignatius with those given by Gertrude<sup>46</sup> in her *Spiritual Exercises* and examines them as "an alternative set of focusing desires that appear to be particularly congruent for women maturing in their intimacy with Christ or God" (Ruffing 2000: 24). Gertrude's exercises follow a dynamic of rebirth (the desire to be reborn in God); spiritual

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<sup>46</sup> St Gertrude of Helfta lived c. 1256-1302 and was part of a Benedictine Monastery. What remains of her writing includes *Exercitia Spiritualia* (Spiritual Exercises) which contains reflections, prayers and hymns centered around the liturgy of the church, and an autobiographical work entitled *The Herald of Divine Love*.

conversion (to become God's own dwelling place of love); spiritual marriage (awakening love in mutual cherishing; consecration (following Christ through desires and prayer); mystical union; (joining oneself to God in affection, devotion and longing); jubilation (praise of the divine) and making amends (Ruffing 2000: 25). In making this comparison Ruffing raises a key question as to whether the differences in the sequence of desires proposed by Ignatius and Gertrude are developmental, (Gertrude's stages being for those more advanced in their spiritual journey) or whether they are saying something to us about gendered differences in spiritual desire. Her observations suggest that in giving the Exercises directors need to be sensitive to the possibility that some women's desires may be differently expressed or timed (than is expected in the sequence of desires outlined by Ignatius) and that there needs to be freedom to make room for the way in which desire unfolds in the individual woman.

Given the context in which women are often estranged from their desires and the possibility of gendered differences in desire, it may also be important not to impose the particular sequence of desires Ignatius suggests but rather to allow deep and authentic desires to emerge out of the woman's own experience of prayer, even if this means that the dynamic unfolds somewhat differently to the classic, arguably masculine, dynamic outlined in the text. I argue that this is in fact profoundly Ignatian in the sense that Ignatius always emphasized the crucial importance of giving the Spiritual Exercises in the way most profitable for the person's growth in relationship with God.

### **2.2.6 The purpose of the Exercises**

I maintain that not only the dynamic but also the purpose of the Exercises may work itself out somewhat differently in the lives of many women. As discussed earlier in this chapter, some see the primary purpose of Exercises as that of making an election. This may involve the choosing of a state of life or a particular ministry or, for those for whom the primary election has already been made, it may be geared towards a "reform of life" in which it is expected that some form of resolutions will be made as to how the chosen state of life may be lived with greater fidelity to Christ. The question at the heart of the election is "What am I called to do for Christ?"

This question does not seem to fit well with the experience of women in South Africa whom I have accompanied through the Exercises. It may be that for these women making the Exercises has a different, but equally profound purpose. That core purpose may be relational-about coming to find a sense of self through personal relationship with God or Christ. The question may be more one of “Who am I called to be in relation to Christ?” or Who is God asking me to allow Him/Her to be for me?

Gilligan (1982) describes Erikson’s understanding of male identity as preceding intimacy and generativity, whereas for women the tasks of identity and intimacy seem to be fused as the woman comes to know herself in relationship to others or another. Dyckman Garvin and Liebert (2001) discuss women’s development as usually flourishing in and through relationship and intimacy. It would seem that men and women need to respond both to a call to mission and to a call to relationship/intimacy and that one could lead to the other. Perhaps in the stage of finding one’s identity, more women are called first into relationship/intimacy. The experience of women may require us to reexamine and expand what we mean by the “election” in the light of a more relational emphasis.

Prayer in the Exercises is profoundly relational. The Second, Third and Fourth Weeks are all focused on imaginatively praying the life of Jesus. The transformative power of the prayer is seen as the pray-er “constantly contemplates Jesus-who he is, what he values, and how he acts. Gradually we desire to share that life, those values, and actions more deeply and with greater constancy” (Ruffing 2000: 19).

### **2.2.7 Women and the Exercises of the First Week**

Recognised contemporary writers on the Exercises<sup>47</sup> stress the importance of the exercitant knowing him or herself as deeply loved by God as a prerequisite for moving into the Exercises of the First Week. Philip Shelldrake writes,

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<sup>47</sup> These include John Veltri (1998) and Joseph Tetlow (1999, 2000)

In embarking on the Exercises we accept that there will be for all of us, a refinement of images, for to cling to them would be idolatry and would constitute a serious block to further movement. However what of those people who have images of God which are negative or dangerously destructive? Most directors will have met such people and realise the damage that can be done during the difficult meditations of the First Week if they are not radically changed. (Sheldrake 1983: 90).

For many women it is perhaps even more important to address the questions of image of self and image of God prior to engaging in the meditations on sin. Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert maintain that it is vital to critique unhelpful notions of self which are present in the text of the Exercises, as “meditating on this material can create hazards for both self-concept and God-image” (Dyckman 2001: 157). This is particularly important in the case of women many of whom come into the process struggling with a negative self-image.

Feminist theology suggests that men and women may need to approach the area of sin from different starting points. Valerie Saiving (1992) rejected the notion that male experience is normative and challenged the thinking that pride is the core sin for both men and women. Judith Plaskow who built on Saiving’s work argues that “the ‘sin’ which the feminine role in modern society creates and encourages in women, is not illegitimate self-centeredness but failure to center the self, the failure to take responsibility for one’s own life” (Plaskow 1980:92). Anne Carr (1988) also emphasizes the necessity of reinterpreting Christian understandings of sin given the experience of most women. Sin for women often consists in the failure to recognize themselves as created in the image of God. In a culture which encourages women to put others first even to the detriment of self, the sinful tendency towards self-abnegation and self-destructiveness may be more true of most women than pride which Ignatius saw to be the core sin.

Feminist scholars see the sin of pride as describing the sins of the powerful who refuse to recognize the rightful boundaries of others, and the sin of hiding as the refusal of the responsibility to become a self that is so often the plight of women and men who are not in positions of power (Suchocki 1995: 32 in Dyckman 2001:163).

In the South African context in which there are perhaps more marked power discrepancies particularly between black men and black women, this may be even

more the case than in the North American and European contexts. The extent of the problem of abused women in South Africa, in which many women collude with their oppression and ill-treatment, may be linked to a low sense of self-esteem among women and a “passive failure to develop a sense of self, a sense of agency and responsibility” (Carr 1988: 186 in Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 165). The Exercises hold the possibility of either exacerbating this situation if the text is literally and uncritically applied, or of liberating women from it if they are led into the process in a way which facilitates the discovery of their own dignity and giftedness.

Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) also point to the reality that many women experience themselves first as victims of sin. Before they can confront their own sinfulness, part of the First Week experience may need to involve healing of the pain they have experienced in abusive or oppressive situations. Many directors of the Exercises<sup>48</sup> believe that for women coming out of such situations, this is a necessary dimension of the First Week.

### **2.2.8 Women and the Exercises of the Second Week**

The Exercises of the Second Week are focused on coming to know and love the person of Jesus more deeply. The prayer of the Second Week is comprised predominantly of Gospel Contemplation and fantasy meditations.

The Second Week is usually the longest “Week” of the Exercises journey. There are two strands; the first is that of the so-called *Key Meditations* which run through the Second Week starting with the *Call of the King* and progressing through the *Two Standards* and *Three Classes of Persons* and ending with the *Three Degrees of Humility*. The second strand consists of coming to know the person of Jesus more intimately by means of Gospel Contemplations on his life and ministry. Ignatius proposes that the retreatant ask for “an interior knowledge of our Lord, who became human for me, that I may love him more intensely and follow him more closely” (Sp. Exx. 104).

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<sup>48</sup> Among these directors are Renate Dullman and Francis Keenan of the well-known St Beuno’s Spirituality Centre in North Wales

Some women face particular challenges in the Second Week. Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) raise the importance of Christological issues for many women making the Exercises. Their experience of women in the North American context is that many feel simultaneously liberated and oppressed by their experience of Jesus the Christ. (Dyckman et al 2001: 185). Elizabeth Johnson (1991) in her article on *The Maleness of Christ* points out that,

If Jesus is the revelation of God, then when

the Christ symbol points to maleness as an essential characteristic of divine being itself,” the exclusive use of Father-Son imagery to describe the relationship reinforces these exclusive symbols (Johnson 1991:108 in Dyckman et al 2000:185-186).

However Johnson also argues against what she calls “a naïve physicalism which collapses the totality of Christ into the human man Jesus” (Johnson 1991: 113 in Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 186).

Grant claims that for some African American women Jesus is identified with as “a co-sufferer, equalizer and liberator.” (Grant 1993: 56 in Dyckman et al 2001: 187). One wonders whether this may also be the case particularly for black African woman in South Africa who have suffered oppression not only on the grounds of gender but also of race.

### ***2.3.8.1 The Key Meditations***

The meditation on the *Call of the King* is on the surface very masculine in its imagery. The exercitant is encouraged to imagine a temporal king whose invitation to follow him elicits inner attitudes of devotion, and willing self-sacrifice. The imagery and language used in the meditation may evoke strong negative reactions for some women.

Many women reject the militaristic and triumphalistic language and the underlying concepts: obeying a temporal king, conquering infidels,

participating in the victory, being a good subject or an unworthy knight for an eternal King” (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001:191).

It has to be remembered that Ignatius was using the imagery of his own time and which resonated with his own experience to elicit and strengthen the exercitant’s desire, commitment, dedication and singleness of mind and heart. As a parable the image of a king may not speak to some women, but the image used can easily be changed to one with which the individual can resonate.

The purpose of the meditation is to deepen the exercitant’s generosity and desire to follow Christ. Many directors today ask the exercitant to think of a person who they deeply admire either a well-known figure such as Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa, or someone who has been an inspiring role model for them personally. They can then use the feelings elicits by imagining that person choosing them, to act as a kind of bridge to imagining how they feel and want to respond at hearing Christ calling and choosing them to follow him. Here again Ignatius knows and elicits the power of the imagination as a means by which the person can become more open to God’s grace.

As Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert note:

What if, like Ignatius, one recalled a person who unleashed one’s admiration and loyalty in a relationship that elicited personal ‘greatness’...Opening up and out to Someone beyond oneself, yielding in love, can be a contemporary and equally compelling Call of the King (Dyckman et al 2001: 193).

Both women who make the Exercises and those who give them, tend to instinctively modify the externals of meditations which for them are not helpful in praying the essence of the meditation. In her book *I Hear a Seed Growing*, in which she shares some of her own retreat notes from the Exercises, Edwina Gateley finds her own expression of the *Call of the King* meditation. The image which arises out of her prayer on this meditation is that of giving birth to the Compassionate Woman who will tend and feed the lost sheep.

It is the compassionate woman who will feed the sheep-not the soldier in you. You have fought a good fight. Give birth to the compassionate

woman. I am aware of the struggle. I am leader, guide, catalyst. But the compassionate woman follows, tends, feeds. I am afraid of changing roles. Where is the King? The battlefield? Where are the soldiers? I am a good leader, but I only see the Shepherd and all he says is “Feed my Sheep”...I have been a soldier for such a long time. But is it the compassionate woman who will feed the sheep. From soldier strong, unyielding to woman, life-giver, nurturer (Gateley 1990: 47-48).

The discovery of personally meaningful images and metaphors throughout the Exercises process is extremely important. Maureen Aggeler (1992) suggests that the images and metaphors which emerge for women may reflect differences in the way they come to freedom. Drawing on the work of Marion Woodman, a Jungian analyst, she suggests that metaphor is powerful because it involves both the conscious and unconscious: “living the metaphors often involves a leap of consciousness that forces us to recognize not only gifts we buried long ago but also gifts we know not of” (Woodman 1990 in Aggeler 1992: 21).

*The Two Standards Meditation* (Sp. Exx: 137-147) is the next of the so-called Key Meditations. Its purpose is to enable the exercitant to see more clearly the ways in which she can be lured into choices which are not for Christ. While the image of a battle and two opposing armies may not be helpful for many women, coming to see more clearly which choices lead to Christ and which do not is at the heart of this meditation. For those who have reached this place in the Exercises the discernments are usually more subtle. What is important is for the exercitant to come to a clearer sense of when and how her choices resonate with those of Christ. “Discernment in the Two Standards acts like a tuning fork for discerning the realities of life, indicating resonance or dissonance with the God who dwells within” (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 195). One way of exploring *The Two Standards* is for the exercitant to examine what she finds deeply life-giving.

One of the most critical concerns when giving the key meditations of *The Two Standards*, (Sp. Exx: 137-147) *Three Classes of Persons* (Sp. Exx:149-156) and the *Three Degrees of Humility* (Sp. Exx: 165-168) is with helping the exercitant to an authentic understanding of humility and indifference. If humility is misunderstood as being about “passivity, hiding and low self-esteem” (Dyckman et al 2001: 196-197), then to ask for humility is seriously problematic, in particular for women who may

well already be struggling to overcome low self-esteem. Humility is rather about an honest awareness of both gifts and limitations. To ask for poverty and insults in imitation of Christ may also be problematic for many women. Where women do in fact live in grinding material poverty this prayer could be misinterpreted as discouraging attempts to break out of the cycle of poverty and exalting a situation which is dehumanizing.

The purpose of the key meditations which are interspersed with and anchored by the imaginative contemplations on the life of Christ is to help the exercitant to come to a place of Ignatian “indifference” in which that final sentence of the Principle and Foundation “I want and I choose what better leads to God’s deepening life in me’ (Sp. Exx: 23) is the place from which a key decision or election can be made.

One of the aspects which may hinder women in the making of a major discernment according to Dyckman et al is that many women are only able to imagine a very restricted range of options and that few women know how to value their own experience. They suggest that one of the important roles of the director may be to encourage the woman pay attention to her desires through her dreams and imagination. There may be old wounds which emerge and need healing before a major decision can be made in freedom. (Dyckman et al 2001). One of the key issues on which the research hopes to shed further light, is this question of what is meant by “The Election” for women in the Exercises and whether it usually takes place in the Second Week as anticipated by Ignatius.

Apart from the *Key Meditations*, the Second Week consists of imaginative contemplations on the early and public life of Jesus. The exercitant is to come to know the person of Jesus through watching him, listening to him and engaging with him, using particular passages as the starting point for that engagement. In coming to know the person of Jesus, Ignatius trusts that he or she will increasingly come to love him and desire to follow him. Of the texts which Ignatius proposes for the retreatant very few involve women as the main protagonists and this can negatively affect some women exercitants in their seeking to know Jesus in relation to them as women.

Dyckman et al quote the experience of a contemporary woman:

I read about the call of the disciples and they are all men. The women who follow Jesus seem to come to him because they have something wrong with them that he has to fix (Dyckman et al 2001: 181).

It would seem to be important to also include texts to which the person can relate most easily. Many women find the Wedding at Cana, the Samaritan Woman at the Well and the story of Martha and Mary particularly helpful texts for contemplation in the Second Week which were not included by Ignatius. This is well in line with the Ignatian maxim to use whatever helps the exercitant to grow in relationship with God and to abandon those things which hinder that process.

Many women also connect deeply with Jesus through the infancy narratives and the contemplations on the “hidden life.”<sup>49</sup> “Many of the early contemplations involve domestic scenes, giving glimpses into Jesus’ human formation: experiences of dependency, nurturing and learning” (Dyckman et al 2001: 189). These are experiences with which many women have a deep resonance out of their own experience of giving birth and raising children. Women look for images of Jesus to which they can relate. These may include images of Jesus as prophet, healer and teacher (Dyckman et al 2001: 189). The image of Jesus as Mother is one which for some women opens up a new and helpful way of relating to Jesus.<sup>50</sup>

The dynamic of the Second Week leads to a gradual personalizing of commitment, moving from an objective sense of a “Call of the King” to a profound personal commitment to know, love and follow Christ and to accept the concrete implications for her life (Dyckman et al 2001: 207).

This movement to a deep personal commitment to the person of Christ in the Second Week is explored by Rob Marsh in an article called *Id Quod Volo: The Erotic Grace of the Second Week*. I suspect that this approach may have particular importance for understanding the experience of many women in the Exercises. Marsh talks about the

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<sup>49</sup> The exercitant is invited to imagine the life of Jesus as a child growing up in Nazareth. We know almost nothing from scripture about his life at that time hence the term “hidden life.”

<sup>50</sup> The image of Jesus as a mother hen gathering her chicks may be found in Matthew 23:37. It also occurs in the writing of some of the mystics. Julian of Norwich calls Jesus “our true Mother.” (Colledge and Walsh 1978: 295 quoted in Dyckman et al 2001:189).

purpose of the Exercises as being “for falling in love” (Marsh 2006: 8). He traces the process of falling in love which happens largely in the contemplations on the life of Jesus. From the still somewhat abstract ideal of saying ‘yes’ to the still somewhat abstract and idealistic *Call of the King* we come to a deepened knowledge of and love for this person Jesus.

At the start he was all abstraction and hope and activity; but by the end he is *this* man, a man I have come to know intimately. I’ve watched his birth and held his warm weight; I’ve been there as he’s grown up and been made man before me; I’ve seen his struggle and loved his laughter. I’ve gazed at him and found him gazing back; I’ve heard my name on his lips. I’ve been drawn into his friendship; I’ve watched him work, suffered his hardship, wrestled with his self-discovery. I’ve discovered I need him, and been sweetly shocked that he needs me too (Marsh 2006: 8).

Marsh asserts that by the time the exercitant comes to the Third Week of the Exercises a profound shift has taken place,

A long week later as Jesus goes to the cross, what dies is not just a dream or a project. It is my beloved. I’m not mourning my shattered hopes, my doomed calling. I’m mourning a man, a man I have come to love (Marsh 2006: 8).

For some women, and perhaps more easily for most women than for most men, the relationship with this man Jesus can grow into a lover/beloved relationship such as that described in the writings of many of the mystics. Marsh speaks of the grace of the Second Week as an erotic grace. He describes eros and the erotic as having desire at the core, whether that desire is overtly sexual or not.

Second Week knowing leads to loving because in it we feel desire, feel attraction, feel knowledge in the flesh. And through desire, knowing moves into action-not just any action, but the action that emerges from loving, and from loving what the lover loves. To know and to love move us to follow: not just doing but doing *with*, doing what he is doing (Marsh 2006: 10).

Marsh emphasizes both that the experience of contemplating the mystery draws the person into deeper engagement with the person of Jesus, and that the desiring is mutual. He suggests that this experience of falling in love can be disconcerting, even disturbing in its intensity and mutuality. It makes us vulnerable.

Marsh illuminatingly describes the relationship between knowing, loving and following and suggests that this love (eros) is the link between knowing and loving. It is not doing (mission) disconnected from loving that is the outcome of the Second Week. “What matters is knowing *this* Jesus-the one whom my graceful imagination makes present-loving him and following him in a unique way” (Marsh 2006: 12).

### **2.2.9 Women and the Exercises of The Third Week**

The Third Week of the Exercises invites the exercitant to enter into the passion of Jesus. Dyckman et al emphasize the importance of the exercitant’s seeking to share in his suffering and not focusing on personal experiences of suffering. While it is true that this is the focus, it is also the case that for some women (perhaps those making the Exercises in Veltri’s (1998) “healing mode”) bringing their own experience of suffering into the experience of contemplating the suffering of Jesus can be profoundly healing.

The relationship and love that has developed during the Second Week is tested in the Third Week experience. The decision to follow Jesus leads inevitably to a sharing in his suffering (as it will to a sharing in his glory.) Dyckman et al warn that the image of Christ as sacrificial lamb and victim may be problematic. Women who have a strong emphasis on an atonement theology may see a vengeful God and a victimized Christ. They quote a contemporary woman who said,

The all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good Father God sent his Son to earth to be killed. The son went meekly as a lamb to the slaughter without complaint. This sounds to me like cosmic child abuse is the way of salvation (Dyckman et al 2001: 218).

It may be helpful to ensure that the exercitant understands that we are redeemed by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. “Jesus died because of the way he lived, the fidelity and commitment of his life and his liberating message” (Carr 1996: 174, quoted in Dyckman et al 2001: 219).

The Third Week can appear to be very much dominated by the experience of men. Women are very much present however throughout the passion narrative. “The “voiceless” women in the passion narrative communicate eloquently by their faithful presence at the death and burial of Jesus” (Dyckman et al 2001: 221). They are present with Jesus just as the exercitant is invited to be with the one she loves as he suffers. Rosenblatt suggests that “the mute women who stand at the foot of the cross or look on from afar identify with Jesus, because Jesus has become identified with them” (Rosenblatt 1992: 45). There is an identification which can deepen empathy and love.

Dyckman et al warn that some women may be blocked in the Third Week by a sense of debilitating guilt over being the cause of Jesus’s death evoked in the Exercises by phrases such as “consider how he suffers all this for my sins” (Sp. Exx: 193). Directors need to be alert to the possibility and danger of the internalization of this kind of guilt.

### **2.2.10 Women and the Exercises of The Fourth Week**

The resurrection involves the transformation of women into autonomous witnesses whose testimony is ultimately reliable before the community of men (Rosenblatt 1992: 46).

The passion and resurrection redefines the role of women in a way which is liberating. They are recognized in their roles as disciples and evangelizers. What does this mean for those contemporary women grappling with limitations placed on how and where they can proclaim the Good News?

For women praying the Fourth Week the non-biblical meditation on the appearance of Jesus to his mother can be a powerful entry point especially if there has been a helpful identification with the experience of Mary during the Third Week. Women who have a Mariology that does not take Mary seriously as a real woman can struggle here. Male theologians have laid such emphasis over the centuries on her simultaneous embodiment of virginity and motherhood that identification with her by women who

cannot be both can be problematic (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert: 2001). Another issue is the portrayal of Mary as docile and subservient rather than highlighting her courage and strength. In her book *Truly our Sister* Elizabeth Johnson (2003) helps us with the vital task of reclaiming Mary as someone with whom women can identify.

Suggesting that the woman pray with the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, a meditation which is not included by Ignatius in the text of the Exercises can be very fruitful. It is a contemplation which affirms both the intimacy with Jesus who calls her by name, and the sending out to spread the good news. Mary Magdalene can be a powerful role model for women.

Dyckman et al caution that “Postresurrection appearances are not necessarily ecstatic, dramatic or highly emotional, Consolation has many, frequently subtle, manifestations” (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 236). A woman may need to be helped to notice her own experiences of the Risen Christ especially when these are not dramatic or intense.

### **2.2.11 The Contemplation to Attain Divine Love**

The Contemplation to Attain Divine Love is a prayer with which most women tend to connect easily. It highlights the mutuality and intimacy of the love which has deepened during the Exercises. Like Marsh who emphasizes the relationality of the process, Dyckman Garvin and Liebert (2001) suggest that the Exercises dynamic progresses in terms of a deepening relationship which moves from transcendence through immanence to a relationship of intimacy.

The expressed progression of the dynamic of the Exercises develops in terms of relationship. The one making the Exercises begins by seeing her place in the universe, becoming a fallible but faithful follower of Jesus, rejoicing in Jesus’ resurrection, and only after that hearing the *language* of invitation to profound intimacy and mutuality with this God-in-Jesus (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 241).

## 2.3 CONCLUSION

One of my primary concerns in this thesis is to explore the experience of contemporary African women making the Spiritual Exercises as a Nineteenth Annotation retreat. My interest is how those directing women in the Exercises can be more sensitive to women's experiences. As I have shown in the course of this Chapter there is still very little literature on women and the Exercises. That which exists does not come out of an African context. The most comprehensive work done so far in this area is that of Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) in their book *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed. Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*. This is undoubtedly a key contribution to the work in this area.

Questions which have emerged for me from the limited literature in this area and from my own experience and that of colleagues giving the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation to women include: Does women's developmental process differ from that of men (as many feminist theologians suggest) and if so what impact does this have for women making the Exercises? How do images of God and image of self shift for women making the Exercises, and what facilitates or impedes that process? Do women use different metaphors in the process of coming to greater freedom? What helps women to enter more deeply into the process? Do black South African women experience the dynamic differently given their different cultural roots and their historical experience of oppression? What questions are women in South Africa bringing to the experience of the Exercises? The research interviews will shed some further light on these questions and raise new questions which are not yet being presented in the writing on women's experience of the Exercises.

## **CHAPTER THREE - LITERATURE REVIEW: OBJECT RELATIONS AND DIALOGICAL THEORY IN RELATION TO THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES.**

In this chapter which focuses on the psychological I will consider in more depth two major psychological approaches, namely object-relations theory and dialogical-self theory. Both these theories give relationship the central place in psychological development. For this reason they may provide helpful insights for a better understanding of the relational processes which I believe are pivotal to women's experience of the dynamic of the Exercises. The object-relations approach sheds light on the development of the God-representation while Dialogical Self theory first expounded by Hermans Kempen and Van Loon (1992) offers a helpful cluster of related theories which may help us to more fully appreciate the role of different kinds of imaginative prayer and the relationship with the director in expanding and changing the retreatant's image of God and self. The latter part of this chapter looks at the general application of concepts of Dialogical Self psychology to the processes of the Spiritual Exercises.

### **3.1. PSYCHOANALYTIC AND OBJECT-RELATIONS APPROACHES**

The object-relations school which encompasses a variety of different theories develops the work of Freud. Rather than emphasizing biological drives, its emphasis is firmly on the fundamentally relationship-seeking nature of the person.

In each object-relations account, the human organism is seen as inherently social, embedded in matrix of relationships, seeking relatedness with others in a primary and fundamental fashion (Mitchell 1984: 478).

Object-relations theorists suggest that,

over time early interpersonal experiences cause the build-up of a richness of images which function as psychological structures in the mind and

shape how the person's resultant personality relates to the world (St Clair 1994: 7).

This happens through a process of internalization or "taking in" of external relationships which then become part of the inner world of the person. Object relations theories place considerable emphasis on the earliest months of life (the period prior to Freud's Oedipus Complex), for the development of the self. Winnicott, (1965), Kohut (1971) and others, emphasise the importance of the earliest relationships, in particular that of the mother and baby, and the process of the internalization of "objects" for the formation and development of the psyche. These insights are significant for our attempts to understand the formation of a God-representation.

Very little attention has been given however by most object-relations theorists to understanding religious experience. This may be in part because Freud's pejorative interpretation of the function of religion which he considered both an illusion and a regressive defense mechanism (1927). Neither Melanie Klein (1948) nor Anna Freud (1966) dealt with the God-representation, while Winnicott (1965) did not go beyond locating the beginnings of religious development in the time of transitional phenomena and affirming the value of illusory experience (Rizzuto: 1979).

There are however some psychodynamic and object-relations theorists who have begun to address the important question of how the person's internal representation of God develops including the Jesuit psychoanalyst William Meissner (1987, 2003) and Argentinian-born psychoanalyst Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979). Among those who have addressed this question of the God-representation, Rizzuto (1979) has done the most substantive work. Her book entitled *The Birth of the Living God*, theorizes about the genesis and development of the God representation throughout the life cycle. The theory generated is derived from in-depth clinical research into the lives of patients in a psychiatric hospital, but according to Rizzuto (1979) the findings have application to the lives of people not suffering from psychiatric difficulties. The impetus for the work was in part the discovery of a significant gap in the literature. Other than some descriptive studies in the area of developmental psychology, there were no clinical studies of the development of the God-representation. Rizzuto (1979) chose to focus

on the “private, more secret and personal experience each believer has with his or her God” (Rizzuto 1979: 3-4). Rizzuto’s work is of importance for this study which also seeks to understand the processes involved in changes of both God-representation and self-representation though more specifically in women making the Spiritual Exercises.

Rizzuto takes a psychodynamic approach and begins by giving serious consideration to the ideas of Freud<sup>51</sup> who was the first to give attention to the psychological processes underpinning the development of a God-representation.

### **3.1.2 Freud’s view of the development of the God-representation**

Freud described the development of the God-representation as a process occurring around the time of the Oedipal conflict in which the male child uses primarily his paternal imago to form his God-representation. The paternal imago is split enabling the formation also of a Devil representation. The male child’s future relationship with God hinges on his relationship with his biological father and changes in concert with it. Freud does not present any explanation for the development of the God-representation in females other than cross-inheritance (Rizzuto 1979: 41-42).

Freud theorized that there exists “a direct correlation between the individual’s relation to the father, especially with regard to the resolution of the Oedipus Complex, and the elaboration of the idea of God” (Rizzuto 1979: 4). For Freud God was simply an exalted father image.

Psychoanalysis has made us familiar with the intimate connection between the father-complex and belief in God; it has shown us that a personal God is psychologically, nothing more than an exalted father...Thus we recognise that the roots of religion are in the parental complex (Freud 1910:123 in Rizzuto 1979: 15).

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<sup>51</sup> Freud wrote two major anthropological works on religion *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) in which he sees human beings as having created God in order to meet their psychological need for a God. He also wrote two essays, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) which express his view that religion is essentially “no more than a reflection of the dynamic conflicts between the ego, the id and the super-ego”.

When the Oedipal complex is resolved, this phase ends with a change of the paternal imago which according to Freud “is transformed into the God-representation through “exultation” after “sublimation” of instinctual wishes toward the father” (Rizzuto 1979: 43). Freud also contends that ambivalence towards God as Father arises from the fact that the father is the object representation out of which both representations of God and the devil are formed (Freud 1923: 86 in Rizzuto 1979: 21). He argues that the relationship of the individual to the father contains,

two sets of emotional impulses that were opposed to each other: it contained not only impulses of an affectionate and submissive nature, but also hostile and defiant ones. It is our view that the same ambivalence governs the relations of mankind to its Deity (Freud 1923: 85 in Rizzuto 1979: 21).

Freud’s understanding of object-relations is summarized by Rizzuto as follows:

1) All new objects by definition must make use of the internalized imagos and are perceived in their context and under the influence of their libidinal attachments; 2) the process of object internalization ceases with the end of childhood; and 3) the final internalization is that of divinity, whatever form it may take (Rizzuto 1979: 29).

If Freud’s understanding were correct there would be little room for a shift in God-representation. The earliest years of life would more or less determine it. In Freud’s thinking, the image of God and resolution of the oedipal complex and the formation of the God-representation create an internal world, whose closed universe of imagos cannot be changed except in his view through analysis. Rizzuto claims that “while this is undoubtedly true for many people, it is not universally true of the God-representation” (Rizzuto 1979: 45) and that “unless completely repressed and isolated defensively from its roots, the representation of God, like any other is reshaped, refined, and retouched throughout life” (Rizzuto 1979: 8).

The God-representation remains throughout life a kind of transitional object which can be tapped into or neglected. “It ordinarily undergoes transformation in concert with revisions in the intimately related parent and self-representations” (Wulff 1991: 324).

Rizzuto's work also shows that the God-representation is often packed away and not engaged with. It then usually becomes irrelevant, and out of step with the person's development in other areas, for example intellectual or cognitive development. Significantly for our study Rizzuto argues that "once created, our God dormant or active, remains a potentially available representation for the continuous process of psychic integration" (Rizzuto 1979: 180).

Rizzuto claims that there are two key moments for potential shifts in the God representation. The first occurs at puberty when the child begins to be able to think in abstract conceptual terms, and the second is during the last part of adolescence when the person is grappling with major life decisions such as marriage, profession etcetera. At other moments of significance in the life cycle when the person faces crises, transitions, and opportunities, the God representation may potentially undergo a shift. Alternatively it may remain stagnant and unchanged, which seems often the case.

### **3.1.3 Rizzuto's genesis of the God-representation**

Rizzuto disagrees with Freud's contention that only the paternal imago is used in the formation of the God representation. Her research suggests that both paternal and maternal imagos as well as fantasy images of the 'wished-for parent' or the 'feared parent' of the imagination contribute towards the formation of the God-representation. (Rizzuto 1979:44) She also points out that by placing the creation of the image of God in the resolution of the Oedipal complex of the father-son relationship, Freud entirely neglects to examine the influence of the father representation, or any other representation, on the girl's conception of God. (Rizzuto 1979: 15)

Rizzuto states:

The fantasy of the child certainly adds colour, drama, glamour and horror to the insignificant moments as well as to the real tragedies of everyday life. It is out of this matrix of facts and fantasies, hopes, wishes, and fears in the exchanges with those incredible beings called parents, that the image of God is concocted (Rizzuto1979:7).

Rizzuto is at pains to emphasise that all God-representations are generated from multiple sources of experience and will be different for each person. However she

outlines a broad chronological process of the genesis of the child's God-representation. Amongst the most significant factors are the conscious and unconscious attitudes of the parents towards God and the child even before the child is born. In the earliest weeks of life the child bonds with the mother through the experience of feeding which according to Erikson provides the basis for the development of basic trust. (Erikson, 1959 in Rizzuto 1979: 184)

Winnicott (1971) and Kohut (1971) describe this phenomenon of the need for reflection of oneself by the other or the mirror as a core experience in the process of becoming human. The child sees him or herself mirrored in the face and especially the eyes of the mother. This is a critical moment in the child's development of the God-representation.

The child's early experiences of "mirroring" in relationship to the mother provide the basis for important elements in structuring his relationship with God. In his experiences of the mother as a loving and caring presence, in nursing, and in the mother's participation in mirroring by which the child finds himself narcissistically embraced, admired, recognized and cherished, he discovers a symbiotic union with the mother that can serve as the basis for an evolving sense of trust, acceptance and security (Meissner 1987: 29).

Later as the child grows into a toddler Rizzuto (1979) suggests that the desire to understand causality causes the child to ask questions like "Who made the sea?" Through the responses of the parents the child develops the idea of a superior being-even more important and powerful than mommy and daddy. This has a deep impact on the young child.

For Rizzuto (1979) God is a transitional object used by the child to buffer him or herself against the inadequacies of the parents. She adds though that God as a personal companion, belongs to the

ineffably private side of human experience where we are irremediably alone. A convincing sense of being alive, connected, in communion with ourselves, others, the universe, and God himself may occur when, in the profoundest privacy of the self, "an identity of experience" takes place between vital components of our God-representation, our sense of self, and some reality in the world (Rizzuto 1979: 204).

Although the God-representation in Freud's view is primarily created by the child in his internal world it is also influenced by the social experience of the family through which image of God is also mediated, in particular when a child is introduced to formal religious practice. According to Rizzuto it is at this stage that "the God of religion and the God of the child-hero face each other...no child arrives at the 'house' of God without his pet God under his arm." (Rizzuto 1979: 8).

### **3.2 OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY AND THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES**

Rizzuto's work has important implications for this study. Her work broadens our understanding of the multiple influences that make up the God-representation and the different ways in which these influences may be used unconsciously by the child in the formation of the God-representation. Firstly her contention that we can understand how a person's representation of God develops in relation to other early key relationships is important for understanding how a person's image of God develops. Her work shows how the young child's early relationship with his or her parents is the foundation for the development of the God-representation. She notes that the God-representation can echo the relationship with the parent. For example, a distant experience of the relationship with the human father may mean a similarly remote experience of a father-God or a neglectful mother may contribute to the formation of a neglectful inner representation of God. On the other hand she explains that the God-representation may develop in opposition to the human experience.

For example God might be loving and protecting, while the real parents are rejecting and ungiving. Or there can be a rich mix of good and bad qualities in both the God-representation and the parental representations (St Clair 1994: 34).

According to St Clair (1994) ambivalence towards the parents is often similarly reflected in the person's relationship with God. She also notes along with Winnicott (1971) that the God-representation is not formed by early object-relations alone but is also mediated by familial, cultural and societal influences. "God is found in the

family. Most of the time he is offered by the parents to the child; he is found in everyday conversation, art, architecture, and social events” (Rizzuto 1979: 8).

Secondly, Rizzuto’s (1979) contention that the God-representation is not fixed but can be revised is critical to the thesis.

The God-representation changes along with us and our primary objects in the life-long metamorphosis of becoming ourselves in a context of other relevant beings. Our description of the God-representation entitles us to say only that this is the way God is seen at this particular moment of a person’s psychic equilibrium (Rizzuto 1979: 52).

She argues that that the revision of God-representation is a life-long task and that certain conditions may impede or facilitate that process. Based on the results of the interviews with women who have made or are making the Spiritual Exercises, I argue in this thesis that the process of the Spiritual Exercises offers a particularly helpful context for the revision of the God-representation.

Spiritual directors place great importance on what they call the person’s “image of God”. In the language of spiritual direction the term “image of God” is basically synonymous with what Rizzuto means by a person’s “God-representation”. The significant difference is that spiritual directors operate with a belief that behind a person’s image of God there exists an actual God, whereas psychologists of religion do not take a stance on that issue. The object-relations school of psychology, unlike the Freudian emphasis on biological drives, emphasizes the drive towards relationship as the most significant factor in human development. As part of its developmental process the baby must come to terms with the reality that the mother cannot always fully meet its needs. Developmentally, from a Winnicottian (1965) perspective, this is vital if the baby is to come to experience itself as separate from the mother. In order for this to happen the baby must have the experience of the mother not perfectly anticipating and meeting all its needs. The infant must learn to cope with the frightening experience of separateness and the consequent experience of sometimes being alone and helpless. In order to cope the infant tends to cling to an object such as a teddy bear or a favorite blanket which serves as a transitional object –“something which is both ‘out there’ in the physical world and which carries significance for me

in my internal world-an object which I both discover and create” (Callaghan 2003: 22). Brendan Callaghan, a Jesuit psychologist, suggests that the transitional space of the teddy bear is an in-between space between inner fantasy and external reality. In later life this space can be found in the world of artistic experience, and even prayer.

Culture, religion, art, love - all of these essentially human activities and experiences rely on my capacity to stay at the point of intersection between the outside and the inside, between the autistic and the objective. They depend on my capacity to play, to engage in a healthy manner with illusion (Callaghan 2003: 23).

While Freud (1927) saw religious experience as wish-fulfillment, an immature defense against anxiety, and a regressive way of coping with reality, Winnicott (1971) locates religion and the experience of God in a space between the inner and outer worlds. He sees this space of illusion as adaptive and healthy and suggests that this private realm of communication is vital for maintaining a true self.

Using Rizzuto’s theory concerning God-representations, Callaghan (2003) asserts that the imaginative prayer engaged in by the one making the Exercises is a powerful mechanism by which the directee’s God-representation may be shifted. He quotes Ulanov, a well-known author on the subject of prayer: “The real thing is not a mental concept, but a living presence to which we must work out relationship” (Callaghan 2003: 28). Callaghan notes that Ignatius’s instructions to the retreatant are deliberately brief in order to leave the retreatant free to use his or her own imagination. The process of imagination is geared to elicit or evoke the retreatant’s own God-representations. He suggests that “regular engagement in the Exercises permits these symbols (the person’s God-representations) inevitably shaped individually by my unconscious-to be reshaped in ways that reflect my growth and development” (Callaghan 2003: 29). Callaghan emphasizes that what shifts is the personal God-representation which Rizzuto describes as “the living God” (Rizzuto: 1979: 42) and not merely my intellectual or conceptual understanding of God.

Although Rizzuto is clear that the individual’s God-representation is open to change throughout life, she is less clear about how this might happen. She points to life events and crises as catalysts for the possible re-evaluation of the God-representation but

does not go more deeply into the processes involved. She points out that in the depth work of analysis the God-representation is rarely addressed as most analysts have not been trained to see it as of significance for the individual's psychic balance. She points to the importance of the religious education process in helping to ameliorate negative God-representations. For a child who comes to church or to catechetics with either a very negative self-representation or a frightening God-representation, the God offered by official religion can be terrifying.

If official religion had been able to help them, it would have had to offer them something other than the official God they could not handle. It would have listened to their fears, attended to their predicaments, and helped them tease out an acceptable God-representation from the official God that Judaism or Catholicism offered them (Rizzuto 1979: 199).

Interestingly this process which Rizzuto advocates of helping the child to mediate and process their experience and to come to a more helpful God-representation, is exactly what happens in the process of spiritual direction. In the experience of the Spiritual Exercises it happens in a more intensified and sustained way.

The process of making the Spiritual Exercises is of a similar intensity to psychoanalysis. Intensive analysis in the Freudian tradition would often have been a fifty minute session five times a week. The analyst would become the key person in the analysand's life and in his or her thinking and interior dialogue. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Exercises the individual engages with his or her God-representation in prayer every day for an hour and with the spiritual director for an hour each week. (In the 30-day experience of the Exercises the person remains in silence and prays four or five hours per day and meets daily with the spiritual director.) In analysis it is the relationship with the analyst onto which other past relationships are transferred which enables a shift in the psyche. In the Exercises the primary relationship is with God. In praying with scripture on an intensive basis the retreatant engages actively on a daily basis over a period of months with his or her God-representations. The mediation and containment which Rizzuto describes as important in catechesis in helping the person to grapple with their personal God-representation and other images presented through contact with scripture, liturgy etc is provided by the weekly meeting with the spiritual

director whose role is to listen and to create a space for reflecting on the emerging relationship with a changing God-representation.

Douglas Hardy (2000) examines the role of the spiritual director in the process of Christian spiritual direction using a Winnicottian perspective. Donald Winnicott was a pediatrician who contributed substantially to an understanding of the significance of the early relationship between the mother and her baby. Hardy notes that in an effort to keep the focus on the relationship between the person and God there is in the contemporary literature on spiritual direction a tendency to undervalue the significance of the spiritual direction relationship. Hardy (2000) suggests that spiritual directors are used in a similar way by directees as the baby uses its mother. He suggests that the role of the director in facilitating transition is significant. The structured spaces of the retreat and the listening presence of the spiritual director provide a containing, holding environment in which the God-representation can safely be taken out, and explored. I will look at the role of the spiritual director in the experience of women interviewed as this is one of the relational aspects which may operate to facilitate a shift in image of God and self.

### **3.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO FAITH DEVELOPMENT**

Among psychologists working in the field of pastoral counselling structural developmental theory has been significant in the study of faith development. This includes the work of Fowler (1981) Loevinger (1977) and Kohlberg (1977). These theories describe the individual as progressing through stages of development, each of which is qualitatively different from the previous stage. Stages are hierarchical integrates because “higher stages replace and reintegrate lower structures at a level of increased differentiation and adequacy to needs” (Helminiak 1987: 49). Stages are construed as invariant, that is, one cannot proceed to a subsequent stage before all prior stages have been achieved. Stage development from this perspective is not inevitable. It occurs only when there is sufficient cognitive dissonance to necessitate a qualitatively different way of thinking about and relating to the world in order to accommodate the new experiences and information. According to Loevinger (1977),

structural developmental stages are discrete stages in ego development each of which represents a qualitatively different way in which ego structures the personality.

However recently structural theories of human development have been strongly critiqued as has the notion of a “unique, unitary self that normatively and ideally makes progress along a certain path of development” (Debold et al in Goldberger et al 1996: 92).

Stanton maintains that the problem with using categories of ways of knowing is not their use to organize information “but rather their reification which easily leads to a reductionism in which the person becomes no more than the category” (Stanton in Goldberger et al 1996: 29).

The critique also emerges out of the postmodern world-view in which the concept of a unitary self as the way of thinking about identity, (though still dominant in the writing of Christian spirituality) is becoming increasingly untenable.

In a world characterized by multi-fragmented social positioning and the deconstruction of absolute truths, the notion of a unified self begins to stand out like a relic from a bygone era (Cowan and Cooper 1999:1).

Another strong area of critique is that the idea of a unitary self that moves through invariant stages of development is one which derives from western philosophy and may not be helpful in other cultural contexts. Stages of development such as those posited by Loevinger, may simply reflect the values of the American/Western culture from which the theory emerges.

### **3.4 THE SHIFT TOWARDS A DIALOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE SELF**

A movement away from a conception of the self as a unitary structure began as early as 1892 with psychologist William James. James sees a duplex self. He writes:

Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my personal existence. At the same time it is I who

am aware; so that the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it, of which for shortness we may call one the *Me* and the other the *I* (James 1985: 42-originally published 1892).

Later other authors such as Buber and Niebuhr began to write about the self as having several aspects and as being constituted dialogically. There is an “I” or experienced continuity, and a “me,” which includes many selves rooted in bodily existence (Conn 1998: 41).

The uttered pronoun *I* stands for the actor or narrative figure. In this configuration, moreover, the *I* can imaginatively construct a story with the *Me* as the protagonist. Such narrative construction is possible because the self as author can imagine the future and reconstruct the past (Hermans and Kempen 1992: 27).

Over the past twenty five years, arising out of the insights of James and Bakhtin, a theoretical school of dialogical self psychology has emerged. With reference to this study and the interviews which were conducted with women who made the Exercises this theory of the dialogical self may also provide another piece in the puzzle of the mechanism whereby the God-representation may shift. Sarbin along with Hermans and Kempen, argues that “the older theologically derived monological notion of self is inadequate as a formulation for the multiplex and changing nature of self,” (Sarbin in Hermans and Kempen 1993 xiv).

Constructivists tend to view personality development:

as an individually expressed life-span process of on-going self-construction. Such development is viewed as fundamentally dialectical – meaning that new order emerges out of interactions among contrasts. Among other things, this implies that dialogue and diversity play central roles in the elaboration of lives (Mahoney in Goldberger et al 1996: 131).

Constructivists also emphasize that identity develops within the context of human relationships. The notion that identity develops within the context of relationship and dialogue was being posited by philosophers such as Charles Taylor (1994) at almost the same time as the work on the Dialogical Self was first published by Hubert Hermans and Harry Kempen (1993).

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others—our parents, for instance—and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live (Taylor 1994: 33).

For Taylor (1994), as for Hermans and Kempen, (1993, 1996) identity is constantly constructed in the crucible of relationship. This is the case not only with overt interactions, but also imaginal interactions in which the dialogue takes place interiorly with significant others.

On the intimate level, we can see how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others. It is not surprising that in the culture of authenticity, relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-affirmation... (love relationships) are also crucial because they are the crucibles of inwardly generated identity (Taylor 1994: 360).

The notion of relationship as key to development is shared by many psychological schools, including the object-relations approach discussed earlier. McDargh, despite his monological understanding of self, asserts the crucial nature of dialogical relationship when he writes “what motivates human beings from the very beginning is the hunger for a relationship that will confirm and affirm the self as loving and beloved for its own sake” (McDargh 1984: 352).

### **3.5 THE DIALOGICAL SELF**

The dialogical self psychology of Hermans and Kempen brings together the two concepts of self and dialogue. The self is viewed as “a multiplicity of parts (voices, characters, positions) that have the potential of entertaining dialogical relationships with each other” (Hermans 2004: 13). The literary scientist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) created the concept of the polyphonic novel. In the novels of Dostoevsky he found that there was not a single narrator. Rather the narrative was told through the voices of the different characters each of whom had his or her own perspective. There is dialogicality in the way in which different characters tell the story from their perspective, sometimes in a relationship of agreement with one or more of the others,

often in disagreement or contrast. “As in a polyphonic musical work, multiple voices accompany and oppose one another in dialogical ways” (Hermans 2004: 19).

Building on the idea of the polyphonic novel the Dialogical self Hermans and Kempen and Van Loon (1992) began to think about the self in a similar way. Hermans (2004) articulates their understanding in a chapter of a later book as:

A dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous *I*-Positions in the landscape of the mind. In this conception *I* has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The *I* fluctuates among different and even opposed positions. The voices function like interesting characters in a story. Once a character is set in motion in a story, the character takes on a life of its own and thus assumes a certain narrative necessity. Each character has a story to tell about experiences from its own stance. As different voices these characters exchange information about their respective Me(s) and their worlds resulting in a complex narratively structured self. Depending on the individual history and the collective stories of the groups, cultures and communities to which the individual belongs, some of the positions become more dominant than other positions (Hermans 2004: 19).<sup>52</sup>

Lewis (2002) suggests that some I-positions may be less developed and less accessible. When particular voices dominate to the exclusion of others this may be problematic for the development of a rich, differentiated self. One way in which subjugated voices may begin to be heard is through a process of imaginal dialogue.

### **3.6 IMAGINAL DIALOGUE**

The whole concept of dialogue is expanded by Hermans and Kempen. Not only do they maintain that the self is created in dialogue with others in our environment, but “the self” is also seen as intradiological, as made up of multiple autonomous self-positionings. Hermans and Kempen postulate that identity develops dialogically not only in response to social interaction, but equally powerfully in dialogue between different parts of the self and with imaginal others. “Both real and imagined actors populate the narratives that provide guidance for our self-constructions” (Sarbin in Hermans and Kempen 1993: xv).

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<sup>52</sup> These ideas were previously published by Hermans 1996.

According to Watkins (1986) experientially imagined dialogues can take several forms including conversation between a self and an imaginal other(s), between aspects of the Self such as “me” and “I,” or between imaginal others with a self as audience to the imaginal scene” (Watkins 1986:2). In her book *Invisible Guests: The Development of Imaginal Dialogues* she argues for a recognition of the importance of what she terms “imaginal dialogue” for psychological well-being and for moving away from dismissing all such dialogue as pathological or as evidence of psychological immaturity. Watkins follows Corbin’s (1972) use of the work “imaginal” as opposed to imaginary because imaginary is too readily equated with the not-real. She uses the word “dialogue”, both in the sense of exchange for example a conversation, or non-verbal communication between two or more parties, and as the goal of relatedness in which according to Martin Buber “the integrity and autonomy of both self and other are preserved; one neither identifies with nor incorporates the other. Each can address and be addressed” (Buber 1958 in Watkins 1986: 40).

Hermans and Kempen, drawing on the work of Cassirer, talk about mystical awareness as often expressing a tutelary spirit which is not the subject of the person’s inner life but something objective which dwells in the person and is able to be both spatially connected with and distant from the person (Cassirer 1955: 168 in Watkins 1986.) This relates to the sense of God who is both beyond the person and experienced as dwelling within the person.

Watkins highlights the pervasiveness of imaginal dialogue which is evident in the play of children with imaginary friends or with dolls or other toys; in dreams, daydreams, prayer, fantasies and in inner conversations with others who are not physically present. She suggests that, given this pervasiveness, it is unhelpful to relegate imaginal dialogue to a place in theory which understands it as appropriate only to an early stage of development or as evidence of arrested development or pathology. Watkins argues that imaginal dialogues are powerful. They are not mere reflections or distortions of reality. They create reality. For Watkins “the real is not necessarily antithetical to the imaginal, but can be conceived of more broadly to include the imaginal...” (Watkins 1986: 58).

Developmental psychologists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1962) see imaginal dialogue as a developmental stage which is outgrown as the imaginary play of children is replaced by games with rules. Franklin (1981) however suggests that within imaginary play there are trends to both the real and the phantastical. Even within the phantastical “there is within such play a development towards greater inner coherence, just as in reality-oriented play” (Franklin 1981 in Watkins 1986: 65).

Whereas developmental and psychoanalytic psychology focus on how the imaginal other is an internalisation of actual others or of aspects of them—albeit often disguised and distorted representations—the Romantics and others see imaginal beings as often donning the costumes of figures in the upper world yet not reducible to these “actual” others. Personifying is not an anachronistic relic of social life, which serves merely to compensate for absent or inadequate ‘real’ people (Watkins 1986: 69).

According to Watkins (1986:70) object-relations theorists such as Klein (1975) and Bion (1962) concede that internalisation alone cannot account for the differences between imaginal figures and the child’s real-life experience because imaginal others are not always representations of actual others. They attempt to account for this discrepancy by means of a theory of instinct whereby the child is born with the capacity for certain internal representations.

The imaginal other is not simply the conscious creation of the person who knows in advance what that imaginal other will do or say.

As the imaginal other is granted its own animation and agency, it can surprise the imaginer with its words. The imaginal other can act upon the self as well as be acted upon (Watkins 1986: 63).

This is certainly true of the experience of Gospel Contemplation. The imagined characters take on a life of their own. While the person may begin by consciously using his or her imagination they are frequently surprised by what happens as they enter more deeply into the prayer. They experience Jesus or the other characters in the Gospel story responding in ways they could not have predicted.

According to Watkins both Jung (1961) and Hillman (1975) stress,

that imaginal others appear not just through conscious attempts to personify, but are experienced at times as being outside of and independent of one's conscious agency. In their treatment of imaginal others, there is no pressure for experience to conform to a theory of projection, ie., for such others to be eventually experienced as self or as created by self. Instead it is emphasized that the experience of self changes through dialogue with an imaginal other - indeed, it seems as though the imaginal other is creating the self, as much as the self is creating the imaginal other (Watkins 1986: 68).

This will be important when we look at what happens to individuals making the Spiritual Exercises in their experience of imaginative contemplation. If what Jung (1961) and Hillman (1975) maintain is accurate then shifts in image of God cannot be simply ascribed to projection.

When imagination is seen as creative of realities, wish is construed positively as a longing that gives rise to this creation. From this point of view, imaginal dialogues do not merely ameliorate a harsh reality (though of course often they do) but are active in the construction of imaginal realities (Watkins 1986: 72).

This is also connected with the Ignatian understanding of desire which is the starting point for every period of prayer.

### **3.6.1 The dialogical self in relation to the Spiritual Exercises**

Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises emerged in an historical context in which the self was understood as monological. It is however striking, that the processes used in the Exercises seem to reflect an implicit awareness of the multifaceted and dialogical nature of self. Hermans and Kempen and indeed a whole school of dialogical-self theorists<sup>53</sup> propose that the self is multifaceted and dialogical. If this assertion is accurate and the retreatant changes through dialogue with others (whether real or imaginal) and with different aspects of the self, then the Spiritual Exercises are potentially not only a powerful means of spiritual growth but also of psychological development.

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<sup>53</sup> See *The Dialogical Self and Psychotherapy* Edited by Hubert Hermans and Giancarlo Dimaggio (Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge. 2004).

A number of key concepts derived from an understanding of the dialogical self can be seen as integral to the fabric of the Exercises experience. While dialogical-self theory and related concepts cannot alone account for the transformative effects of the Spiritual Exercises, they may shed significant light on the efficacy of this approach from a psychological perspective.

In this section we will look at a number of key concepts and at how these may be seen at work in the dynamic of the Exercises. We will focus on *imaginal dialogue*, *the private audience*, *possible selves*, and on the claim that the Spiritual Exercises as a whole are in their construction and implementation dialogical and relational. We will examine two relationships; the “imaginal” relationship with God as facilitated through such methods as “Gospel Contemplation” and “Colloquy”, the relationship between the retreatant and the spiritual director, and the interplay between those two relationships as facilitators of spiritual and psychological change.

### **3.6.2 Imaginal Dialogue in Gospel Contemplation, Fantasy Prayer and Colloquy**

According to Hermans and Kempen’s theory of the dialogical self, the self develops in response to situations of imaginal dialogue. They argue that imaginal dialogues are on-going and shape significantly the on-going construction of identity.

One is continuously in dialogue with one’s critics, parents, conscience, gods, reflection in the mirror, the photograph of someone missed, a figure from a movie or dream, one’s baby or pet (Hermans and Kempen 1996: 41).

The Spiritual Exercises invite the retreatant very explicitly into situations of imaginal dialogue with God, with Jesus, with Mary and with a whole host of other people who are characters in the scriptures. At times Ignatius also invites the retreatant to engage in imaginal encounter in situations that are not mentioned in the scriptures for example the first meditation of the Fourth Week when Jesus appears to his mother. These imaginal encounters are most often Gospel Contemplations and colloquies.

Gospel Contemplation<sup>54</sup> is a form of prayer which, though not invented by Ignatius<sup>55</sup>, has come to be acknowledged as a typically Ignatian method of prayer. The retreatant is invited to enter by means of the imagination into the mysteries of the life of Jesus. The imagination is to be stimulated by using the senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and sometimes even taste to imaginatively make as present as possible that moment or experience, in order to be able to enter into it and in some way participate in that mystery.

The use of Gospel Contemplation is most marked in the meditations of the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises in which the retreatant is urged to grow in an intimate knowledge of Christ whom he seeks to follow, and, where so graced, to imitate. To this end the retreatant is invited to enter into the mysteries of the life of Christ.

It should be emphasised that the mysteries in question are not to be merely reconstructed by an imaginary return to the past...Because Christ is risen, all his mysteries somehow partake in his eternal now, and become really present to the retreatant at prayer (Wickham 1991: 146).

In each contemplation Ignatius proposes a similar method for entering into the mystery. In each case the first is the “history”. The retreatant is to call to mind through imagination the background to the mystery that is to be prayed. For example in the contemplation of the Nativity the retreatant is asked to recall,

how our Lady, nearly nine months pregnant (as we may devoutly think of her) and seated on a donkey, with Joseph and a servant girl, taking with them an ox, set out from Nazareth for Bethlehem to pay the tribute which Caesar has imposed on all those lands (Exx: 264).

In what he terms the second prelude, Ignatius then asks the retreatant to compose the place by imagining the road between Nazareth and Bethlehem. He gives some suggestions to help the retreatant to get a sense of how this is to be done:

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<sup>54</sup> Also referred to as Imaginative Contemplation.

<sup>55</sup> This was an a way of praying that Ignatius would have read about in for example the work of Ludolph of Saxony's *Life of Christ*.

Here it will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, considering the length and breadth of it, whether it is a flat road or goes through valleys or over hills and similarly to observe the place or grotto of the nativity, to see how big or small it is, how high and what is in it (Sp. Exx: 264).

Ignatius's concrete suggestions of different ways in which the road and grotto may be seen, indicate quite clearly that this way of praying is not about the truth of realism but about a deeper truth, that of each individual retreatant's own experience of the mystery which is entered into in prayer. The retreatant is then instructed to ask for the grace that is desired, in this case to "ask for inner knowledge of the Lord who became human for me so that I might the better love and follow him" (Sp. Exx.113).

This entire section of the prayer belongs to the instructions known as The Preludes and is therefore preparatory. The fact that Ignatius (who was not a man given to an excess of words), takes so much trouble to explain it, gives a strong indication that he considered it an important help to entering the imaginal dialogue. Although many directors do not insist on the retreatant following exactly the points given in the preludes asking for the grace which is desired and entering imaginatively into the mystery is what is important and each retreatant will hopefully find a way that facilitates this process.

Imaginative contemplation does not mean slavishly sticking to the script, much less spending inordinate time on unnecessary details of the scene. Visualising Jesus clearly is not important; a sense of presence is enough. Often communication is "felt" or intuited, rather than heard as ordinary conversation (Dyckman Garvin and Liebert 2001: 130-131).

The third prelude, in which the retreatant asks for a specific grace is critical as it sets a clear agenda for the imaginal encounter that is to follow.

Ignatius then describes the points of the material for contemplation. He directs the retreatant to see the participants. Mary, Joseph, and a servant girl on the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

The first prelude is the history; here, how our Lady, nearly nine months pregnant (as we may devoutly think of her) and seated on a donkey, with Joseph and a servant girl, taking with them an ox, set out from Nazareth to

Bethlehem to pay the tribute which Caesar had imposed on all those lands (Sp. Exx. 264)<sup>56</sup>.

Here one gets an indication of Ignatius' own imagining of the scene. Nowhere in the Gospels is mention made of a servant girl but to someone of Ignatius's background it would have been natural to expect that Mary would have had a servant girl to assist her. In the following two points Ignatius insists that the retreatant is to "reflect on the experience and to draw some spiritual profit," through remembering that Jesus's birth into this situation of "toil, hunger, thirst, heat and cold"....is all "for me" (Sp. Exx. 116).

Faithful to the spirit of the text Ignatian directors encourage their retreatants to enter into the experience of the nativity in whatever way they can identify with it most strongly. Many women, who have been through labor themselves, can clearly imagine and identify with the nativity in a completely different way from Ignatius. Each retreatant is to bring the resources of his or her own experience, memory and imagination in order to affectively engage with Jesus.

A scripture text does not just provide a revelatory glimpse into the past, but a way of looking at oneself and others in the present. The story enters into one's own journey (Dyckman et al 2001: 130).

The meditation is concluded with a Colloquy.<sup>57</sup>

The whole process of imaginative contemplation, which is critical to the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises, creates a directed, focused and intense context for the development of the dialogical self. Sarbin claims that:

one of the features in the development of the dialogical self is the skill in imagining. Stories about self and about others are told in the context of social action and imagined interaction. We are greeted with a pleasant surprise in adult life. Actions that are labeled real and actions that are denoted as imagined both contribute to the multi-voiced self (Sarbin1994: xiv-xv).

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Ivens's translation of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*. Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2004.

<sup>57</sup>The Colloquy will be discussed in detail in 3.6.2

From a theological perspective, the interaction of the retreatant in the Gospel Contemplation is one in which, through faith, there can be a transformative encounter with an other or others, who though not physically present are nevertheless not merely a construct of the imagination but exist also beyond the imagination of the retreatant. Even if one were to deny this theological perspective, from a psychological view the retreatant is shaped and changed through the encounters with those people and situations which constitute the narratives which are entered into via the imagination.

### 3.6.3 Colloquy

Another key aspect of the Spiritual Exercises is the use of Colloquy. At the end of virtually every exercise, whether an imaginative contemplation or a meditation, the retreatant is instructed to make a colloquy. The notion of colloquy is introduced by Ignatius very early in the Exercises during the First Week.

A colloquy, properly so called, means speaking as one friend speaks with another, or a servant with a master, at times asking of some favour, at other times accusing oneself of something badly done, or sharing personal concerns and asking advice about them (Sp. Exx: 54).

After the prayer of consideration using both imagination and reason on The Sin of the Angels (Sp. Exx: 50), The Sin of Adam and Eve (Sp. Exx: 51) and The Sin of One Person (Sp. Exx: 52), Ignatius invites the retreatant to make a colloquy. At this point in the prayer “the mode of prayer changes and the retreatant enters on what will be later understood as ‘imaginative contemplation’” (Ivens 1988: 53).

Imagining Christ our Lord present before me and nailed to the Cross, make a colloquy asking how it came about that the Creator made himself a human being and from eternal life came to temporal death, and thus to die for my sins. Then, turning to myself. I will ask. “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ? Finally seeing him in that state hanging on the cross, go over whatever comes to mind. (Sp. Exx: 53).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Here I make use of Michael Ivens’s translation of The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2004).

The retreatant is to engage imaginatively with Jesus on the cross and there is the expectation that in reflecting on the questions “What I have done for Christ, What am I doing for Christ and What ought I to be doing for Christ” (Sp. Exx: 53) the retreatant will be confronted by his or her lack of love in the face of this immense love of Jesus who gives himself for me on the cross.

The colloquy should be an open and spontaneous conversation heart to heart conversation in which the retreatant engages in intimate dialogue with the person of Jesus. In this dialogue the retreatant is encouraged to share with the Other the feelings and thoughts which have arisen during the time of imaginative prayer. In Veltri’s instructions for the retreatant at this point he says “Talk with Jesus on the cross...Let him talk with you!” (Veltri 1998: 174).

It is not only verbal dialogue that is of importance in the time of colloquy. There may also be a consciousness of being silently engaged with God in whatever attitude or feeling has been elicited in the prayer.

According to Michael Ivens in his reflection on Ignatius’s invitation in the colloquy to speak “as one friend speaks to another” (Sp. Exx: 54),

The conversation model brings out the spontaneous and personal character of this prayer, but too strict an interpretation of the model could lead to a limited understanding of colloquy precisely as prayer. The model points to a whole quality of relationship, and does not imply that actual speaking will dominate. In any case, conversation includes listening and in the prayer of a spiritually maturing retreatant colloquy will come increasingly to be characterised by contemplative listening (Ivens 1998: 54).

In the colloquy there is an encounter with God (or with Jesus or Mary), who is an imaginal other; a private audience with whom they may enter into intimate dialogue. As Ivens notes, “in the colloquy the exercitant enters on what will be later understood as ‘imaginative contemplation.’” Dialogical self-theory suggests strongly that this imaginal dialogue is likely to shift something in the constellation of the retreatant’s inner “I-positions”.

### 3.6.4 The Private Audience

Baldwin and Holmes (1987) suggest that “a sense of self is experienced in relation to an audience: people who are present or imagined, specific or generalised, actual or fantasized” (Hermans 1996: 38). Along with Andersen and Cole, (1990) their studies maintain that significant others form “rich, unique and accessible internal representations that may function as a kind of private audience that watches or listens to the retreatant and responds to him or her “with affect-laden evaluations” (Hermans 1996: 39).

I would argue that this concept of “Private Audience” is an important and helpful one to examine in the context of the Spiritual Exercises. In the process of the Exercises, the retreatant engages with an internal representation of God, which operates as a private audience. Ignatius emphasizes the importance of the retreatant’s awareness that he/she engages in the prayer in the presence of a significant other/s.

In the text of the Exercises the directee is explicitly instructed to be aware of God looking at him or her at the beginning of each period of prayer. Additions 1-5<sup>59</sup> are instructions regarding aids to prayer. The third addition states:<sup>60</sup>

A step or two before the place where I have to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the space of an Our Father and, with my mind raised up, consider how God our Lord is looking at me etc. I will then make a genuflection, or some other act of humility (Sp. Exx: 75).

The retreatant engages in each of the prayer exercises that follow, in the context of an awareness of God looking at him or her. This means that even before the retreatant enters into the material for the prayer they are aware of themselves as the subject of the other (God’s) attention. In considering how God our Lord is looking at me, Marsh suggests that “we experience for a moment that we are desired, that we begin outside

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<sup>59</sup> According to Michael Ivens 1998: 64 these are practical notes which “represent the distillation of much experience, and the text of the exercises themselves leaves no doubt about the importance Ignatius himself attached to careful observance of them” (cf 6, 90, 130, 160.).

<sup>60</sup> In a recent issue of *The Way* Rob Marsh makes this third addition the subject of his article entitled, “Looking at God looking at you.” In *The Way* 43 (4): 9-28.

ourselves, that who we are is not self-generated... We receive ourselves in the eyes of another” (Marsh 2004: 25). He further notes that:

In the third addition, Ignatius invites us into a complex, relational reality. If God is looking at us, God is in relationship with us. As we try to understand this relationship, we can focus either on God or on ourselves. We can consider the God who is looking, and what that God is like. How is God feeling? As we move between these two ways of responding to Ignatius’ invitation, they begin to fuse, to enrich each other, to be woven into something intricate and beautiful. I am looking at God looking at me looking at God. When I look at the God who looks at me, it is not a matter simply of seeing the other as one object among many, but of looking, gazing, contemplating. We see each other. The look transforms - it is encounter (Marsh 2004: 26).

In the final prayer of the Exercises, The Contemplation to Attain Divine Love (Sp. Exx: 230-237). the retreatant is to imagine themselves standing “before God and all the saints who are praying for me” (Sp. Exx: 232). This awareness of the “private audience” of the whole heavenly court serves to underline the significance of this moment in which the retreatant is invited to make an act of surrender to the love of God.<sup>61</sup> There is a solemnity about the awareness of being witnessed by God and by those who have gone ahead.

Givers of the Exercises in recent years have tended to ask the retreatant to make an examination of consciousness<sup>62</sup> at the end of each day. Veltri refers to this as the Awareness Prayer (1988: 34). In this prayer the retreatant is encouraged to reflect back over the experiences of the day in the presence of God, trying to see them with God’s eyes. Here too the retreatant is being encouraged to an ever-stronger awareness of God’s constant gaze. The retreatant learns to be increasingly conscious in an on-going way of the response and desire of an “Other”-God, who functions as a private audience. This consciousness of the response and desire of the other shifts the way in which the retreatant thinks reacts and chooses.

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<sup>61</sup> The offering which the retreatant makes at the end of this prayer is “Take Lord and receive all of my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will-all that I have and possess. You have given it all to me. You gave it all to me to you I return it. All is yours. Dispose of it entirely according to your will.. Give me only the love of you, together with your grace for that is enough for me. (Sp. Exx: 234 ).<sup>61</sup> Here I make use of Michael Ivens’s translation of The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola.( Herefordshire: Gracewing. 2004.).

<sup>62</sup> This is not the same as the examination of conscience in paragraphs 32-45 of the Exercises.

The retreatant's inner representation of God (in Rizzuto's terms the God-representation) or, in the language of spiritual direction, their image of God, becomes a central concern in the process of the Spiritual Exercises. The retreatant who imagines God looking at him/her with love and concern will have a very different experience from one who imagines God looking at them in a judgmental and or disinterested manner. The theory of "private audience" suggests that the experienced or perceived reactions of the significant other/s have a profound effect on the way the retreatant sees and experiences him/herself. The more significant the other becomes for the retreatant and the more they become conscious of the other in relation to their on-going experiences, the more powerful that effect.

### **3.6.5 The Director of the Exercises as a "Private Audience"**

During the Spiritual Exercises the retreatant meets regularly with the director. In the case of the Exercises made as an enclosed 30-day retreat, they meet once a day and in the Exercises in Daily Life<sup>63</sup> generally once a week. During these meetings the director is to "allow the creator to deal with the creature."<sup>64</sup> In other words the director is not to interfere with the process of God revealing God's self to the retreatant. This is particularly so when there is an important decision to be made in a retreat of election. The director is not to allow his or her preferences or desires to intrude into the retreat. However the director in the days or months leading up to the Exercises and in the Principle and Foundation has as one of their most important roles helping the person to move towards an awareness of God as loving creator. Hopefully the fact that the director experiences God as a loving creator will be evident to the retreatant. Drawing on object-relations theory one may hypothesize that the director's attitude/s towards God will become increasingly internalised by the directee. This

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<sup>63</sup> The Exercises in this format are also referred to as a "Nineteenth Annotation Retreat."

<sup>64</sup> Ignatius writes in his 15<sup>th</sup> Annotation: "...it is more opportune and much better that in the search for the divine will the Creator and Lord communicate himself to the faithful soul, inflaming that soul in his love and praise, and disposing her towards the way in which she will be better able to serve him in the future. Hence the giver of the exercises should not be swayed or show a preference for one side of a choice rather than the other, but remaining in the center like the pointer of a balance should leave the creator to deal with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord." Sp. Exx: 15).

happens when, as a result of repeated interactions, the directee internalises to some degree the attitude of the director towards God, which is then in dialogue with the directee's existing attitudes and perceptions of other aspects of the self. This is not to suggest that the directee develops the same image of God as is the director's dominant image at that time. The role of the director is never to impose their own dominant image of God but rather to facilitate with great caution and sensitivity the directee's growing awareness of the ways in which God is making God's-self more fully known to the directee.

The director encourages and teaches the retreatant to imagine God speaking directly and intimately to him or her. The scripture passages used for the disposition days<sup>65</sup> for the Exercises and to expand the themes of the meditation on the Principle and Foundation are all focused on God's love and providential care. Some directors<sup>66</sup> also spend time encouraging the retreatant to pray about his or her life and to see how God has been creating and sustaining them through the events and circumstances of their lives. In the interviews between director and directee, especially in this early period, directors would affirm and encourage a growing image of God "as loving creator who calls us to full humanity," and would gently challenge destructive images of God. The spiritual director not only influences the directee in those encounters, but is also internalised as a significant other and therefore a kind of 'private audience.' Hermans and Kempen and Van Loon note that:

Many clients also explain that they often have imaginal discussions with their psychotherapist when confronted with a problem in their daily lives (e.g. What would my therapist say about this?) and take the result of the following imaginal discussion as a guide for their actual behaviour (1992: 29).

It may be argued that the same can be said for the process of spiritual direction. Like therapists, perhaps more so, spiritual directors tend to be perceived by their directees as wisdom figures, and hence their influence extends beyond the spiritual direction session itself. Although good spiritual directors, unlike psychodynamically-oriented

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<sup>65</sup> Also known as preparation days in which the retreatant is helped to reach the dispositions necessary to enter the process of the Spiritual Exercises.

<sup>66</sup> Several full days are devoted to praying and sharing one's faith journey at some of the most well-respected retreat centres giving the exercises as a 30-day retreat, for example St Beuno's in North Wales.

therapists, discourage the development of transference<sup>67</sup> by encouraging a focus on the relationship between the directee and God, it is not possible to avoid it entirely. The frequent direction sessions in which it is the retreatant alone who discloses his or her inner experience cannot help but generate a relationship in which the director becomes a significant other in the directee's experience. Directees will often report that they imagined what the director might say with regard to a prayer experience or to a situation which arose in their life between two sessions. They may even have been influenced to a particular course of action by an imaginal dialogue with the director.

It may be argued that directors, both in the spiritual direction sessions and in the imagination of the directee outside of the sessions, function as a significant private audience. It seems likely and important that as the relationship with God is expanded and deepened through the process of the prayer, the significance of the director as private audience recedes. In the early stages of the process it may provide an important bridge.

### **3.6.6 Possible Selves**

One of the notions included in the dialogical understanding of self is that of "Possible Selves." Possible Selves represent "individual's ideas of what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation" (Markus and Nurius 1986: 954).

Possible selves are not the same as current selves but are connected to them in the sense that the retreatant can visualise themselves as becoming an imagined possible

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<sup>67</sup> One of the key differences between psychodynamic psychotherapy and spiritual direction lies in the development or otherwise of the transference. Psychodynamic therapists use the transference as the basis for eliciting unconscious material to be analysed in the sessions. As the primary tool it is of vital importance to develop it. In contrast spiritual directors want to keep the directee's focus not on the direction relationship but on the relationship between the directee and God in which the director should play only a facilitative role. They therefore try to limit the development of the transference. See Janet Ruffing's *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* for a discussion of the transference in her section entitled the "As If" Relationship: Transference and Countertransference in Spiritual Direction. (New York: Paulist, 2000), pp 155-183.

self. Individuals can generate any number of possible selves but they are generally derived from the retreatant's particular context, and the most powerful influences in that context. Those influences might include the media and the individual's personal experiences such as encounters with their family and peers. For example a child who is taken to watch the ballet and to attend ballet classes is far more likely to identify "prima ballerina" as a possible self than a child whose life does not involve experiences which would feed that particular possible self.

In this view development is a process of "acquiring, and then achieving or resisting certain possible selves" (Markus and Nurius 1986: 955). They are seen as important because, whether positively or negatively, they function as incentives for future behaviour. "Some possible selves stand as symbols of hope, whereas others are reminders of bleak, sad or tragic futures that are to be avoided" (Markus and Nurius 1986: 960).

A retreatant may behave in a particular way either out of an aspiration towards a particular possible self or out of a desire to avoid an undesired possible self. For example, a retreatant may develop the possible self of an alcoholic who cannot keep a job if they grew up in a context in which a significant other was in this position. They may strive to act in ways that would avoid the possibility of their becoming their undesired possible self. Possible selves also provide a context for the evaluation of the current view of self.

Decision-making is also an area where the notion of "Possible Selves" plays a significant role. The retreatant may envisage what the desired possible self would do in a particular situation. Obviously the more behaviour is carried out in the direction of the desired possible self, the more there is a shift towards the envisaged possible self, which may become a current self.

While the psychological theory relating to "Possible Selves" has emerged several hundred years after Ignatius wrote the Exercises, it is striking to observe how Ignatius uses a process of exposing the retreatant to "Possible Selves" as a means of

facilitating conversion. This may be seen throughout the Exercises but it is most marked in the Key Meditations of the Second Week.

The creation or strengthening of possible selves can be seen first in the meditations of the First Week. The retreatant has been asked to imagine the consequences of choosing sin. The envisaged possible self which rejects God and suffers the painful consequences of that rejection (hell), is one which Ignatius hopes the retreatant will fear and therefore strive to avoid. Most current directors coming out of a different theological context, wisely reject this emphasis. Instead the retreatant is positively motivated by another envisaged possible self, the loved and forgiven sinner. This may be for example the possible self of the Prodigal Son of Luke 15 or of the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7: 36-50).

In the imaginative contemplation the retreatant allows their own experience to engage with an “imaginal other” whose experience is in some way reflective of their own. In the process of vividly imagining the other in the story that image may take on the potency of a possible self. In praying the story of the prodigal son the person’s own life experience may blend with the experience of the son of the imagined narrative. This may create a new possible self of “unconditionally loved and forgiven” son or daughter. In allowing themselves to identify deeply in imagination with the son embraced in unconditional forgiveness by his father, they may elicit or strengthen a self (remembering that the retreatant is made up of many selves which interrelate), which is unconditionally loved, cherished and forgiven.

In the Exercises of the Second Week the Key Meditations invite the retreatant again and again to imagine various possible selves. In order to develop a particular self the retreatant has to be exposed to it as a possibility, even if only via the imagination. The retreatant also has to desire either to become or to avoid the possible self, depending on its envisioned consequences. Ignatius invites the retreatant to imagine various possible scenarios and responses.

In the Meditation on the Three Classes of Persons (Sp. Exx: 149-156) the retreatant is invited to imagine three possible ways of responding to an attachment which could be

viewed as three “possible selves” The first response is that of a person who desires to be free but postpones acting until it is too late; the second is that of a person who desires to be free but is not willing to let go of what is blocking that freedom; the third response is of the person who desires to be free and who is able to put their love for God before any attachment. “They seek only to will and not will as God our lord inspires them, and as it seems better for the service and praise of the Divine Majesty” (Sp. Exx: 155). The retreatant in being invited to consider three possible ways of responding, is not only being invited to consider which response fits with their current way of being. As they imagine the response of the Third Class of Person this grows as a “possible self” - a way of being which can be imagined and desired.

There is a similar dynamic in the Key Meditation which follows called *The Three Kinds<sup>68</sup> of Humility*. (Sp. Exx: 165-168.) Three kinds of possible ways of being are described. In the first kind the person keeps God’s law in all things; in the second the person wishes to please God in all things and therefore in making decisions the person seeks to be choose what God desires. In the third kind of humility “in order to imitate and be in reality more like Christ our Lord, I desire and choose poverty with Christ poor, rather than riches, insults with Christ loaded with them, rather than honors; I desire to be accounted as worthless and a fool for Christ, rather than to be esteemed as prudent in this world. So Christ was treated before me” (Sp. Exx: 167).<sup>69</sup>

In a sense in this third kind of humility, which cannot be achieved, but is a grace given, elicits the person of Christ as a “possible self” one can seek to imitate. Even if that grace of the desire to imitate Christ in his poverty and humiliation is not received, the meditation opens up for the retreatant in yet another way a “possible self” that he or she could desire to become.

### **3.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has presented some of the literature on object-relations theory and dialogical self theory in relation to the issue of the development of God and self-

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<sup>68</sup> This Meditation is sometimes known as The Three Degrees of Humility.

<sup>69</sup> Puhl Translation 1951

representations. It began by examining the work of Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) in relation to the complexity of the formation of the God-representation and of its openness to change given a facilitative environment for that process. The chapter then presented the shift from a monological conception of self to one which is dialogical and in which the self is made up of multiple autonomous “I-positions”

Imaginal dialogue was presented as an important means by which the self develops and becomes more differentiated. The Exercises do appear to provide a context for considerable imaginal dialogue in the form of intensive exposure to imaginal forms of prayer including Gospel Contemplation and Colloquy. In general terms, possible ways in which the experience of shifts in image of God and self might be facilitated by the process of making the Spiritual Exercises were discussed. As will become evident when the research results are presented in Chapter Five, some of these factors discussed in relation to the Exercises in general did emerge as significant in influencing shifts in image of self and God while others did not.

## **CHAPTER FOUR - METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter I will begin by examining some of the broader methodological concerns in working in the interface between psychology and Christian spirituality. I will then explain the rationale for the research design used in this study and describe in some detail the method used.

### **4.1 THE INTERFACE OF PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY**

Working in the interface between psychology and spirituality presents the researcher with both immense challenges and opportunities. As Perrin states, “the goal is to understand how both psychology and Christian Spirituality contribute to a richer understanding of human development and growth from differing perspectives” (Perrin 2007: 169). Psychology and spirituality both have as their focus of study the experience of the human person. However they come with very different assumptions regarding what may be studied and the ways in which it may be studied. According to Hardy “the division is exacerbated when the psychologist refers only to natural processes while the theologian refers to supernatural or transcendent realities” (Hardy: 2003).

Psychology emerged originally out of the natural sciences, and one major tradition in psychology remains concerned with the observable, measurable and quantifiable. As Perrin notes

Experimental psychology was committed to the research methods of the natural sciences, that is, objectivity, reproducibility, verifiability, and transferability across studies and other branches of psychology...Although there are currently a wide range of research methodologies adopted by the human sciences the origins of research method in the human sciences were pre-occupied with an overly rational approach to reality which still lingers today (Perrin 2007: 170).

Perrin (2007) claims that while psychology and Christian spirituality both study human experience they study it from different points of view: “Truthfulness is

recognized from within the framework in which the questions are first asked: that is, each viewpoint allows a specific horizon of interest to surface with its related concerns and questions” (Perrin 2007: 171). He cautions strongly against any research methodology in the human sciences which may draw researchers away from an attentiveness to certain aspects of human experience arguing that “there is a spiritual dimension of the human that is not fully recognized by a secular view of the spiritual nature of the human” (Perrin 2007: 178).

Working in the interface of psychology and Christian spirituality requires an understanding of the methodologies used in both disciplines in order to work in a way which satisfies the research demands of both.

Research in psychology has become increasingly open to a variety of qualitative research designs and methods; these now represent a large portion of psychological research. Kvale (1992) outlines a variety of philosophical approaches suggesting that postmodernism, hermeneutics, phenomenology and dialectics are all possible epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research methodologies which highlight different aspects of knowledge.

Christian spirituality currently still faces the tensions of trying to gain acceptance as a reputable academic discipline in university settings and it is only now beginning to find acceptance in the academy as a discipline with its own subject matter and methodology. Parallel to this, given the interdisciplinary nature of spirituality, there are considerable challenges in deciding on the research methods and designs which are best suited to the study of the distinctive dimension of human experience which is consistent with both its theological and human science roots.

Schneiders, who has done much of the groundwork in trying to delineate what is meant by spirituality and by Christian spirituality, argues that

Spirituality is concerned with the spiritual life which is today understood as the vital, ongoing interaction between the human spirit and the Spirit of God with both poles receiving equal attention and the focus being on the fact, the modality, the process, the effect, the finality of the interaction itself (Schneiders 2005: 51).

Although Schneiders (2005b: 4) concurs that McGinn's (2005) outline of three main methodological approaches used in Christian spirituality, namely the theological, the historical-contextual and the hermeneutical, all have a place in the emerging discipline, she argues for the hermeneutical as the method of preference. She suggests that the study of Christian spirituality does not have one distinct method but "it has an approach which is characteristically hermeneutical in that it seeks to interpret the experience it studies in order to make it understandable and meaningful in the present without violating its historical reality" (Schneiders 2005: 6).

Schneiders (2005) describes the hermeneutical approach as generally consisting of three phases which should not however be seen as sequential in any rigid way in practice. The first phase involves describing what is being observed in as rich or 'thick' a way as possible. The second step involves critically analyzing what has been described. The third step in the process is constructive interpretation. This third step is important because,

the objective of the study of spirituality is not simply to describe or explain the spiritual experience but to understand it in the fullest sense of that word. Understanding involves not only intellectual deciphering of a phenomenon but appropriation that is transformative of the subject (Schneiders 2005b: 57)

## **4.2 INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

Schneiders (2005a) proposes that if Spirituality is the study of the lived experience of faith, the focus on experience demands an interdisciplinary methodology.

According to Schneiders,

Interdisciplinarity, challenging as it might be, is increasingly the ethos of contemporary research. What is becoming clearer is that many crucial research subjects, among them probably the vast majority of subjects in the area of spirituality, do not fit neatly into one area of investigation. The firm close boundaries of the classical and modern disciplines are giving way to postmodern transgressing of academic frontiers and recombining

of discourses. Method no longer dictates what can be studied or how (Schneiders 2005a: 14).

Interdisciplinarity between Christian spirituality and psychology which is genuinely reciprocally interactive is an area which may be underdeveloped but is growing. Over the past thirty years there has been considerable interest by spiritual directors in the insights and methods of psychology. For example principles of counseling have been incorporated into most training programmes in spiritual direction and spirituality journals including *The Way*, *Presence*, *Review for Religious* and *Human Development* have had a high proportion of articles on psychological perspectives. Many schools of psychology have been slower to engage with theological and spiritual insights and how these might impact our understanding of psychological development. I would argue that both Christian spirituality and psychology are ways of seeking to understand human experience and development. As such they may be seen as equal partners, engaging with the same phenomenon from different perspectives with the potential for each discipline to shed light on and to expand the understanding of the other.

### **4.3 THE SELF-IMPLICATING NATURE OF THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

Along with some other areas of study such as art or psychology, Spirituality, more than most academic disciplines, tends to be self-implicating. The researcher is likely to hold certain beliefs about what he or she is studying and also to be affected as a person by the process and outcome of the research. As Frohlich puts it, “Essential to the self-implicating character of spirituality, there is a certain ineradicable messiness and uncontrollability” (2005: 68).

Within the discipline of Christian spirituality there is still much debate as to what may be studied and how. There is a continuum along which scholars of Christian spirituality are situated with regard to their views on the self-implicating nature of the study of this discipline. The enlightenment approach to academia, which still predominates, holds that good scholarship is a function of striving as far as possible

for objectivity and for minimizing the effects of personal involvement. The study of Christian spirituality however entails almost inevitably some personal involvement of the part of the researcher. Some scholars argue that this personal commitment is intrinsic to and important for the study of Christian spirituality. This end of the continuum includes Elizabeth Liebert (2001) who argues for practice as a constitutive part of the academic study of Spirituality. Her book *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* co-authored with Katherine Dyckman and Mary Garvin incorporated both research involving interviews with women who had made the Spiritual Exercises, and reflection on the researchers' own experiences of praying the material.

Sandra Schneiders (2005a) takes a more conservative approach in this regard believing that academic research should not incorporate practice. She suggests that to be credible in the current academic climate researchers in Spirituality (which is only beginning to be accepted academically) must be aware of and respectful of the conventions which govern academic research. Where the researcher decides to depart from these conventions the reasons must be adequately explained and motivated (Schneiders 2005a: 15). She does, however, acknowledge the complexities involved in finding methods which are academically acceptable and yet which also acknowledge the self-implicating nature of the discipline.

How to integrate a holistic approach to research with full accountability to the standards of criticism, personal commitment to what one is studying with appropriate methodological perspective, and practical involvement with theoretical integrity, is in my view, one of the major challenges that the discipline of spirituality faces as it develops its identity in the academy (Schneiders 2005: 15).

Schneiders also points to the slow but inevitable crumbling of our Enlightenment illusions that we can have access to truth. Postmodernism, and in particular constructive Postmodernism, is far more open to the idea that what we study is always studied from the perspective of the one studying. It recognizes the transcendent dimension of human experience "as constitutive of personhood rather than illusory, and as susceptible of respectful investigation that can be validated if not proved" (Schneiders 2005a: 21).

While we affirm the critical ideas of modern scholarship, it is past time to admit that the Enlightenment ideal of scientific objectivity is, and always has been an illusion. A benefit of the recent explosion of “social location” theory has been to make all of us aware that the only kind of knowing available to us as humans is subjective. There is no presuppositionless, non-perspectival knowing mind that conforms to a free-standing object known in its totality and without affecting it. All human enquiry is self-implicating and all knowledge is personal to some degree. The only truly critical approach is self-knowledge and honesty about our social location and pre-suppositions, and methodological control over their effects (Schneiders 2005a: 20).

Psychology as a discipline is also becoming increasingly influenced by a postmodern paradigm, social constructivism in particular, and how this affects the way research is conceptualized and carried out.

With the breakdown of the universal meta-narratives of legitimation, there is an emphasis on the local context, on the social and linguistic construction of a perspectival reality where knowledge is validated through practice. There is an openness to qualitative diversity, to the multiplicity of meanings in local contexts; knowledge is perspectival, dependent on the viewpoint and values of the investigator. Human reality is understood as conversation and action, where knowledge becomes the ability to perform effective actions (Kvale 1992: 42).

From a postmodern perspective the qualitative research method is firstly a conversation or dialogue in which knowledge is actively constructed and in which knowledge is understood as interrelational.

#### **4.4 RATIONALE FOR CHOICE OF METHOD**

This study makes use of an interdisciplinary approach in which the experiences of women who have completed or who are currently engaged in the Spiritual Exercises are explored and analysed using both the lenses of specific psychological<sup>70</sup> and theological<sup>71</sup> approaches.

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<sup>70</sup> Dialogical Self Theory of Hermans et al (1992, 1993, 1996) and the Psychodynamic approaches of Winnicott (1965, 1971) and Rizzuto (1979). See chapters three for an explanation of these theories and chapter six for an interpretation of the data based on these theories.

<sup>71</sup> Here the work of Rahner (1960, 1964, 1969, 1970, 1978) and Meissner (1987, 2003) are highlighted. See chapter seven.

It was necessary to choose an approach which would work equally well from the perspectives of both disciplines of psychology and Christian spirituality. My approach is interdisciplinary, qualitative and makes use of Schneider's (2005b) hermeneutical approach. This approach is particularly helpful in helping us to,

*understand* the phenomena of Christian spiritual life as experience. And since understanding of such phenomena is a function of *interpretation*, the presiding intellectual instrumentality is hermeneutics understood as an articulated and explicit interpretational strategy (Schneiders 2005b: 56).

Schneiders also maintains that the process is not linear. It involves a

triple operation which is only theoretically sequential since, as the hermeneutical cycle revolves, the three phases will mutually condition and recondition each other. (Schneiders 2005b: 56).

The hermeneutic approach involves first generating a 'thick' description of the phenomenon or experience. The second step is that of critical analysis which includes interdisciplinary criticism. The third step is that of constructive interpretation which involves understanding and appropriation (Schneiders 2005b).

From a psychological perspective qualitative research stresses the understanding of the social world through the lenses of its participants (Bryman: 1995). This study seeks to elicit the experience and self-understanding of women who are engaged in the process of making the Spiritual Exercises. As an important part of the rationale for this research is to give voice to the experience of these women, this can best be done in a process which values the voices of the women through interviews in which their experience and their own interpretations of that experience may be elicited and explored in some depth.

## **4.5 OVERVIEW OF METHOD**

In this thesis, a qualitative hermeneutical research method was used in which fifteen women who had completed the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat were interviewed in-depth about their experience of making the Spiritual Exercises. In order to control to some extent for the possible modulating effect of the memory of the experience, four other women were also interviewed during the process of making the Exercises, two at more than one point during the retreat experience in order to strengthen the internal validity of the research by enabling both continuity and change to be observed over time. It would have been more definitive if more women could have been interviewed at various points while in the process of making the Exercises. However this was not always possible due to the ethical need to be sensitive to the needs of the retreatants engaged in the process.<sup>72</sup> The themes which emerged from the data were interpreted using psychological and spiritual-theological perspectives.

## **4.6 CHOICE OF SAMPLE**

It was decided to interview women only. The reasons for this are both theoretical and pragmatic. As noted in previous chapters, most of the literature on the Spiritual Exercises is still dominated by a Jesuit (and de facto masculine) perspective. The majority of those who are in direction and directing others are now women and so it seems important to critically examine their experience. Practically, there was also access to a large pool of lay women who had made or were making the Spiritual Exercises and as head of Ignatian Spirituality for the Jesuit-Institute South Africa and previously director of the Centre for Ignatian Spirituality in Johannesburg since 1999 I had access to information about women in the Gauteng area who have made the Spiritual Exercises over the past nine years and those who are currently engaged in the process.

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<sup>72</sup> However the fact that there no significant differences were evident between the two groups i.e. the 15 women who had made the Exercises and the four women interviewed while in the process suggests that this has not adversely impacted on the results.

It was decided to invite women who had made the Spiritual Exercises as a 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat to be interviewed about that experience. The underlying hypothesis was that the majority of women making the Exercises experienced a shift in image of God and self and that something in the method or process of the Spiritual Exercises was significant in facilitating that shift. This hypothesis had emerged out of seven years of experience of directing women through the process of the Spiritual Exercises and supervising others who were directing other women.

Fifteen women who had made the Spiritual Exercises as a Nineteenth Annotation Retreat were interviewed, some on more than one occasion. The interviews were loosely structured conversations with women about their experiences of making the Spiritual Exercises. Thirteen of those interviewed retrospectively were white, while two were black. Their ages at the time of making the Exercises ranged from 24 to 65 with the majority falling between the ages of 35 and 50. Ten of the women were Roman Catholic, two were Anglican, one Baptist, one Methodist and one came from a non-denominational Charismatic church. While the majority of the women had female directors, five had male directors, all of whom were Jesuits

A combination of convenience and saturation sampling was used. Although convenience sampling usually creates problems with respect to the generalisability of results, in this case it is highly likely to be a representative sample of women in the South African context making the Exercises. This is because at this stage the majority of women making the Spiritual Exercises in South Africa still do so through the Jesuit Institute-South Africa<sup>73</sup>. There was a limited pool of subjects to draw from who met the criteria of being women who had made the Spiritual Exercises in South Africa in the past ten years who were available and willing to be interviewed. The pool of potential interviewees continues to grow as more women begin the Exercises process each year but it was decided to stop the interviewing process at the point at which no significant new themes were emerging.

One woman had made the Exercises ten years prior to the interview. Nine had completed the Exercises between one and three years previously and the remaining

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<sup>73</sup> Formerly the Centre for Ignatian Spirituality

five were interviewed within six months of having completed the Exercises. The advantage of time having elapsed since the experience was that the interviewees were able to reflect on the experience of making the Exercises within the broader frame of their on-going spiritual journey. It also meant that that it was possible to evaluate whether the shifts had been sustained in the period after the Exercises. All the women were able to recall with ease what they felt the significant aspects of their experience had been irrespective of how long ago they had made the Exercises. Some however, (particularly those who had made the Exercises several years prior to the interview,) were less easily able to recall the specifics of particular prayer experiences which had been instrumental in those shifts. This was a limitation when I wanted to understand in more detail how particular shifts had happened in the Exercises process. However this limitation was mitigated to some extent by the fact that the women were able to consult their prayer journals of the experience of making the Exercises when they were unclear about any details. I wanted to investigate women's experience of shifts in image of self and image of God in making the Spiritual Exercises and to explore which processes within the context of making the Exercises might contribute to those shifts.

In order to be able to address the disadvantages inherent in the process of retrospective interviews four other women were also interviewed at various points in the process of their making the Exercises. One was interviewed at the end of the Principle and Foundation and at the beginning of the Third Week. Another was interviewed the beginning of the Second Week. The third was interviewed at the beginning of the First Week and the Fourth was interviewed during the Principle and Foundation and at the beginning of the Second Week. What was noted in these interviews confirmed the themes which had emerged in the interviews of women who were interviewed after having completed the Exercises.

#### **4.7 DATA COLLECTION**

Because of the nature of the 19th Annotation Retreat which takes place in daily life, it is impossible to establish with any certainty how far perceived changes in image of self and God are solely the result of the Exercises process or the result of other factors

within the retreatant's life situation over that period of on average a year. However women were asked about the shifts which they themselves attributed to the experience of making the Exercises.

Initially the intention had been to conduct structured interviews with space at the end for the women to add other aspects which seemed significant which might not have been addressed by the interview questions. However as the interviews progressed this method was abandoned in favour of a more conversational and unstructured approach. This seemed to result in richer information as the women spoke more freely about their experience. The women were interviewed in open-ended conversations about their experience of making the Exercises in which the interviewer asked open questions such as "Tell me about your experience of making the Exercises" and "What stands out for you about your experience of making the Exercises?" It seemed important to allow the women to tell the story of their experience in as much detail as possible. Instead of specific questions the interviewer wanted to ensure that certain topics were addressed in some way in the course of the interview. As the women answered the questions the interviewer was able to ask follow-up questions for clarification or elaboration. The researcher took a constructivist approach allowing mutual understanding to be generated in the interview process. These areas which emerged were linked to emerging hypotheses arising from the interviews which in turn required further testing and exploration. Lofland and Lofland advise that the analysis be on-going in order that the researcher "be more aware of on-going themes that he/she may want to ask about in a more direct way in later interviews" (Bryson 2001: 322). Themes which were focused on in subsequent interviews included: why the woman decided to make the Exercises, the woman's experience of Gospel Contemplation and colloquy including specific examples of prayer experiences wherever possible, their experience of the direction relationship; shifts in image of God and image of self, shifts in relationship with God and the woman's early experiences of God as mediated by significant others.

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the women and transcribed verbatim.<sup>74</sup> Verbatim transcripts were used in virtually all the interviews. The advantage is being able to capture the actual words and phrases used to describe the experience. The interview with interviewee 10 was not recorded as the women expressed discomfort with being interviewed. The interviewer attempted however to write down her words verbatim. Four of the women interviewed also gave additional information in response to questions by e-mail. This was necessary in two of the cases (Int. 4 and 5) as the women were overseas at the time of the initial interviews. However follow-up interviews were done with both on their return to South Africa some time later. The other two women were interviewed and subsequently offered additional information by e-mail having gone back to consult their prayer journals kept while making the Exercises (Int. 12 and 13).

## **4.8 DATA ANALYSIS**

### **4.8.1. Step 1: Description**

Initially the transcripts were read to identify the participants' description of their image of self, God, changes in images etc. Each interview was read several times initially looking for and highlighting phrases or narratives which gave insight either directly or indirectly into the woman's image of God and image of self pre-Exercises and post-Exercises.

### **4.8.2. Step 2: Critical analysis**

At this stage Pre-Exercises images of God were clustered into images of different types for example distant images, ambivalent images; positive but underdeveloped images. These images were contrasted with the images of God which the women described as developing during the course of the Spiritual Exercises which were significantly more relational. Descriptions of image of self pre- and post-Exercises

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<sup>74</sup> Except in the case of two women who were not comfortable being recorded and whose words I attempted to capture verbatim using short-hand.

were also gathered. At times the pre-Exercises image of self had to be inferred from what was said with regard to the shift. Reported shifts in image of God were looked at in each individual case in relation to reported shifts in image of self to see whether there was a relationship between the two. The pre-Exercises images of those who experienced the most marked shifts in image of self and God were compared with the pre-Exercises images of those who experienced the least marked shifts in image of God and self to see if a pattern emerged.

Where there was a particular kind of shift for example a shift from masculine to feminine image of God (noted in three of the interviews) other similarities were looked for within the interviews to see whether there was a similarity or connection between the experiences of the three women.

The experience of women who had previously made the Exercises and that of women who were currently engaged in the process was compared. The fact that there were no significant differences between the two groups in relation to shifts in image of God and self and the processes described as facilitating those shifts suggests that the data has not been significantly distorted by memory. I looked for similarities and contrasts among women who had had a female director and those who had a male director as this might have been a significant factor in the research. With one exception (Int.13) this variable did not seem to have any noticeable impact on the retreat process.

#### **4.8.3. Step 3: Constructive interpretation**

In line with the hermeneutical approach advocated by Sandra Schneiders (2005b) after the initial steps of 'thick' description and critical analysis in which hypotheses were generated in the light of existing theory, constructive interpretation was engaged in. This was done according to psychological and theological theory, "so that a theoretical elaboration of the category can begin to emerge" (Bryman 2001: 391). I attempted to take each theme which emerged from the interviews and to examine it from both a psychological and spiritual perspective. Imaginal and relational/dialogical factors were examined in the light of the literature on object relations

theory, dialogical self theory and Rahner's (1960, 1964) relational understanding of grace.

As was discussed earlier in the hermeneutical approach the three steps are not distinct as each stage informs and modifies the other stages (Schneiders 2005b). According to Kvale (1992) there is a continuum between description and interpretation. This is certainly the case in this study where a thick description of the data begins almost immediately to present possible interpretations. The data was analysed as it was collected, following the recommendations of Silverman (2000, 2006).

Factors which were described by the women as changing the way they experienced God and themselves (shifts in image of God and self) were analysed. By the time seven of the women had been interviewed, hypotheses relating to shifts in image of self and image of God being connected with imaginative prayer and the director-directee relationship had begun to emerge strongly. It was decided to explore these areas further. Most of the women interviewed named Gospel Contemplation or other forms of imaginative prayer and the relationship with the director as key factors in their shifts in image of God and self.

Examining this from the perspective of dialogical self theory allowed the researcher to theorise about how the relational and dialogical processes in the Exercises facilitate shifts in image of God and self. This phase of interpretation showed the need to go back to women previously interviewed to elicit a more in-depth understanding of their experience of Gospel Contemplation. Some of those who had been interviewed initially were interviewed a second time or, where this was not possible, were contacted by e-mail in order to explore this aspect further (Int. 1; 3; 4; 5). The women were encouraged at this point to go back to their original journal accounts of their experiences so as to get as immediate and as 'thick' a description as possible. The results were also affirmed by a negative case example in which the interviewee<sup>75</sup> who was not able to engage with the relational and imaginal aspects of the process reportedly did not experience any shift in image of self (although she did report some shift in image of God.)

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<sup>75</sup> Interview 13

#### **4.9 THE SELF-IMPLICATING ASPECTS OF THE PROCESS**

It was necessary to approach this study from the perspective of participant-observer. In the first place my own experience of receiving and giving the Exercises will inevitably have impacted on the research process. The Ignatian Spirituality world is small in South Africa. A number of those interviewed are themselves now trained as givers of the Spiritual Exercises through our training programmes. The majority of those interviewed were known to me. I have worked with some of them as trainee spiritual directors and with some as colleagues. I directed three of them through the Spiritual Exercises. This familiarity with about 75 per cent of the interviewees clearly had an impact on the interview process. An advantage of the interviewer being known to all the interviewees either in person or by reputation was significant. People were being interviewed by someone with acknowledged experience of the process. The disadvantage of such a process is that as interviewer one inevitably brings preconceived ideas and expectations about the interviewees and their experience into the interview process.

However those preconceived ideas were sometimes negated in the interview process. The fact that the findings of the interviews were not markedly different in those who were not known by the interviewer prior to the interview suggests that the findings were not affected by this factor. The fact that many of the interviewees had a prior relationship with the interviewer did appear to be a significant factor in enabling interviewees to talk about their experience of prayer at some depth. The advantages of the willingness of the interviewees to trust the researcher with very personal disclosures of prayer experiences would seem to outweigh the disadvantages.

#### **4.10 ETHICAL ISSUES**

There are vital ethical considerations in doing interviews with people on a topic as personal as their prayer experience. The interviewees were invited to take part in a research study on the experience of women making the Spiritual Exercises as a 19th

Annotation Retreat. Those who were still engaged in the retreat process were asked through their spiritual director (and not the researcher) whether they would be willing to participate in a doctoral study on women making the Spiritual Exercises. They would be assured that a lack of willingness to participate in the research or withdrawing at anytime would not in anyway affect their access to spiritual direction through the Centre.<sup>76</sup> They were not initially told that the specific focus of the study is on shifts in image of self and image of God but simply engaged in conversation about their experience of making the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life.

The interviewees were assured that their identities would be kept confidential. They were also told that if there were any questions they did not feel comfortable answering they could decline to do so and that if they were free to discontinue the interview at any point.

It was interesting that all the women approached were willing to be interviewed about their experience of making the Exercises. Those who are involved in the process of giving the Spiritual Exercises themselves were most invested in the research process and most interested to learn the findings. Those who were in the first stages of making the Spiritual Exercises, and who did not have any personal prior experience of the researcher were less invested. One woman asked that the content of two of her most significant and intimate prayer experiences not be shared in the thesis, although she felt happy to share these experiences with me.

One of the ethical considerations which concerned me most was interviewing women still engaged in the process of making the Spiritual Exercises. My concern was that the process of the interview should not interfere with or disturb the retreat process. In an attempt to make sure that this did not happen I approached women for interviews only after speaking to their director to confirm that they were not at a delicate point in the process. Where this was the case, I waited until the director felt that the directee was at a point where talking about their experience would be helpful rather than potentially disruptive to the process in any way. I tried where possible to interview

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<sup>76</sup> In fact none of the women who were invited to participate declined to do so.

the women at natural breaks in the process egg at the beginning, after the Principle and Foundation or First Week or at the end of the process.

One of the important ethical considerations is what the interviewees get in return for sharing their time and experience. A number of the interviewees expressed interest in reading the completed thesis. While there is an important ethical obligation to afford them the opportunity to benefit from knowing the findings of the research, circulating the thesis within the still relatively small community of women who have made the Spiritual Exercises could be potentially unhelpful to some. This is for two reasons; firstly because access to descriptions of an individual woman and quotations attributed to her might mean that some women could identify others even though they are anonymous, thereby potentially compromising confidentiality. A further concern is that it might be unhelpful to some directees to read the psychological and spiritual analysis of what they have shared about their spiritual life in the interviews, in particular in the few instances where negative conclusions have been drawn. For this reason it seems more helpful to make available to interviewees a general summary of the findings available rather than the full text of the thesis.

A number of women expressed that they had found revisiting the experience of making the Spiritual Exercises very helpful and had been grateful for the rare opportunity to speak about the impact of the experience in their lives with someone who could understand it.

#### **4.11 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I outline the rationale for choosing the qualitative hermeneutical approach advocated by Schneiders (2005a, 2005b) and the iterative approach to data collection of Silverman (2006). The hermeneutic approach allowed for an interpretive study of the themes which emerged from the data from both a psychological and a spiritual-theological perspective. The self-implicating nature of the research presents challenges for the researcher but is an unavoidable dimension of the research. However in a postmodern paradigm in which all knowledge is seen as relative and

socially constructed the self-implicating nature of the study does not present a problem as long as there is awareness on the part of the researcher about how this may be influencing the research findings. Attention to ethical issues was important given the personal and sensitive nature of the interview content in which women were being asked to reflect on and articulate something of their experience of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises. Ethical concerns were most critical with regard to the interviews with women engaged in the process of making the Exercises. Great care was necessary in order to ensure that the interview process should not negatively impact the woman's experience of the retreat.

In the next chapter (chapter five) I will present the themes which emerged from the interviews which include desire; shifts in image of self; shifts in image of God; shifts in image of God and self; mechanisms facilitating shifts in image of God and self, and the experience of "election."

## **CHAPTER FIVE - ANALYSIS OF THEMES WHICH EMERGED FROM THE INTERVIEWS**

In this chapter I will present the findings of the research. I will focus primarily on those aspects which have relevance to my research hypothesis that shifts in image of God and image of self in women are facilitated by the imaginal and dialogical processes in the Spiritual Exercises. I will discuss the themes which emerged from in-depth interviews conducted with fifteen women who had completed the Exercises and with four women at different stages in the process of the retreat. I also present two of the women's experience in more depth as case studies: one who had completed the Exercises some years previously and the other who was interviewed while still in the early stages of the process. The three subsequent chapters will interpret the findings first from a psychological perspective and second from a theological perspective and then attempt to dialogue the two approaches.

No significant differences were evident between the women who were interviewed after making the Exercises and those interviewed at different points while still engaged in the retreat. This suggests that the information obtained from the women who were interviewed some time after making the retreat does provide useful information which is not noticeably affected by inaccurate or distorted recall. In reporting the emerging themes I have therefore not divided the retrospective and developmental interviews into separate categories. However they can be distinguished from each other as quotations from interviews done with women engaged in the process of making the Exercises at the time of the interview are indicated by a capital 'D' for example (D. Int. 1).

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION TO EMERGING THEMES**

Key issues which emerged in the interview process and which are presented in this chapter include: desire; shifts in image of God and self; a deepening relationship of intimacy with Jesus or with another image of God; a lessening of defensive mechanisms of people-pleasing and striving; and the importance of imaginative

prayer and the spiritual direction relationship as an effective developmental context for shifts in image of God and self. An issue which I did not set out to examine but which emerged as significant is the connection between the election and the resolution of defensive mechanisms for many of these women.

For each of the women interviewed, the Exercises seem to have provided a space in which sustained psychological and spiritual changes could take place. In general those women who entered the Exercises with a negative or highly ambivalent image of God and self reportedly experienced more change on a psychological level. This may be as a result of a correspondingly greater shift in their image of self and the lessening of defensive mechanisms. For women entering the process with a more positive image of self and God, the experience of making the Exercises appeared to have less impact in terms of how they see themselves and to be more intensely focused on a deepening intimacy with God. One might even be able to see two broad modes in which women are making the Exercises; the first a healing mode in which the woman's images of God and of herself are fundamentally transformed; the second a deepening mode in which the focus is on deepening intimacy in the relationship with God.<sup>77</sup> The two modes are not however mutually exclusive as in some cases both movements happen in the retreat.

## **5.2 THE DESIRE FOR A CLOSER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

Participants describe their entry into the Exercises in different ways but with either the sense of feeling something lacking and wanting to fill that gap; or having had a taste of relationship with God and wanting to deepen that. The majority of the women decided to make the Exercises not because they wanted to make a significant decision but simply because they had a strong desire to know God more intimately. More than half the women interviewed were middle-aged or older and had already made the key decisions about state of life and ministry/work which may partly account for this.

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. John Veltri who talks about the Exercises made in a Healing mode as opposed to Exercises made in a Call Mode in Orientations II Part B. Ontario: Guelph Centre of Spirituality (1998).

Virtually all the women interviewed gave as their primary motivation for making the Exercises the desire for a closer relationship with God. One woman in her late fifties with several children described her experience of coming into the Exercises saying; “I was looking at the time and really trying to find ways of getting closer to God, to really get to know him better...and a little way into it I said to my director and I had written it that I wanted to be so close to God that I could be able to feel his heartbeat.” (Int. 11) and another of the same age and similar background said: “I think before (the Exercises) there had been an awakening of desire within me-of wanting to spend more time-to be closer to God. I was wanting that deeper intimacy” (Int. 12).

The women interviewed spoke of a desire for ‘something more’ and a sense that there was more if only they could find a way of accessing it. One young woman talks about that yearning for an intimate experience of God in powerful language. She said,

It was more like I was crying and crying and saying where is God? Where can I find God and I wanted the kind of God-in my own language I would say the God I found in the Exercises. And somebody else won't understand me but I wanted the God of freedom, the God of love, the God of touching, um the God of the Holy Spirit-the God who understands where I am with the self and my own communication with my ancestors and the God of less rules (Int. 3).

One gets the strong sense from the interviews, even from those who come into the Exercises with negative images of God, that they entered the Exercises with a sense of expectation that this desired intimacy with God could be possible if only they could find a way into it. They see the Exercises as offering a possible way in to that experience of a more intimate relationship with God.

Often the desire is mimetic. The women describe observing others or reading about the experience of others and that igniting that sense of possibility within them. One woman said that she had observed the impact that making the Exercises had had on someone else and that that had inspired her (Int. 2). Another said she had heard others talk about it as a life-changing experience and was intrigued (Int. 4). The youngest woman aged 24 said, “I had read a lot about the Exercises and I was filled with a desire to engage more fully with this thing I had had small tastes of. Probably

(reading) Teilhard de Chardin and Hopkins were key and my encounters with many Jesuits” (Int. 2).

The Exercises were usually made after a substantial period of searching. Many of the women had tried various other forms of prayer, for example Centering Prayer, in an effort to find what they desired but had not yet experienced in a sustained way. One woman describing her experience leading up to making the Exercises said that before then her spiritual life “had desire in it because that is why I kept looking but I never had that experience-well maybe fleeting ones but not in the substantial way that happened in the Exercises” (Int.1). Another described beginning to search as an adult and trying self-help courses, centering prayer and Grail retreats before “finding Ignatian Spirituality which seemed my spiritual home, finally I had found the way to pray” (Int. 4). A woman of similar age said that for a long time she was searching for something more in her relationship with God and that the Exercises were “the first of the stepping stones for her” (Int. 9). A married woman in her early fifties described having wanted a more intimate relationship with God for a long time.

I think just by my nature I have often been drawn into long periods of just sitting with God, which a lot of people don’t relate to-a lot of people think you are just sitting there doing nothing so that has been with me for a really long time and I had done different things like centering prayer and various other things like that but what I really needed was something that was just mine-for myself...I wanted something that was so rooted in God that it was an intimate thing between me and him and not just by rote or by prescription and even though I know the Exercises are very structured, there was for me a lot of freedom in that structure (Int. 11).

### **5.3 A WATERSHED EXPERIENCE IN AN ON-GOING JOURNEY**

When asked to describe the experience of making the Exercises, each of the women described it as an experience which changed her life in a significant and sustained way. Sometimes this sense is simply evident in the significant shifts in the woman’s reported experience which she attributes to the Exercises process. A number of women interviewed however, were very explicit in describing the experience of

making the Exercises as fundamentally life-changing as these quotes from four of the interviews express.

I've thought about this before and I think that the word which best describes it for me is that it was a watershed experience.....it was like life before and life after. I had this real sense that in one way nothing was the same, everything had changed so it was really a very important experience for me (Int. 1).

I no longer feel like the same person at all and in my mind I renamed myself (Int. 2).

Because of this deeper relationship with God my life is changed forever (Int. 4).

In my life there is a before the Exercises and an after the Exercises (Int. 9).

The experience of making the Exercises is described by these women in ways which show that they see the Exercises as a critical time in their spiritual journey but are also conscious that the growth which happens in the Exercises continues after they have been completed. For a number of the women there is a sense that the Exercises prepared the ground for a shift which took place only some time after the Exercises had been completed. One woman who had made the Exercises three years previously and had continued in on-going spiritual direction said:

Sometimes I think it was the beginning of a bigger process- built on an awareness and a knowing that my life will never be the same. It was something I had to know. As I've followed the path afterwards, especially training for and giving the Exercises it's been a lot of "wow" for me. When I look back my experience of the Exercises seems superficial in a way because so much deepening has happened since but it wasn't really. It will always be there as the basis but I've grown beyond my experience in the Exercises. It's an on-going process (Int. 9).

Another woman making a similar point, said that during the Exercises "there was a paradigm shift-my image of God and my image of myself began to shift. The shift didn't take completely in the Exercises. It was the basis for a profound shift later on in my life" (Int. 2).

This woman, aged 24 at the time of making the Exercises, described returning two years later to the most significant prayer experiences of the Exercises in an eight-day retreat and how what had begun to happen for her during the Exercises came to fruition during that subsequent experience. The shift which had begun to take place in the Exercises crystallised into an experience of God as parent, “A God filled with tenderness who looks at me with tenderness and it is in God’s tender regard that I find myself free” (Int. 2).

Some of these women said that in looking back to their experience of making the Exercises they found it difficult to distinguish clearly which things had changed during the Exercises themselves and which had begun to shift during the time of spiritual direction leading up to making the Exercises. “It’s difficult to draw distinct lines now between what was going on in spiritual direction just before and then moving into the Exercises themselves” (Int. 1). This would make sense in terms of understanding the Spiritual Exercises as part of the person’s on-going spiritual development. This is also significant in relation to understanding the significance of the direction relationship and of Gospel Contemplation in facilitating shifts in image of self and image of God. The reason is that these aspects of the Exercises are generally introduced during the period of preparation which precedes entering into the Exercises themselves. If the shifts in image of God and self began to happen as the person was introduced to imaginative prayer and regular spiritual direction, it would seem to support the hypothesis that these imaginal and relational aspects play a key role in shifts in image of self and God in the Spiritual Exercises.

#### **5.4 IMAGES OF GOD PRIOR TO MAKING THE EXERCISES**

While a few of the women came into the Exercises with a positive image of God, a strong relational engagement with God was notably absent for virtually all the women prior to the Exercises. This may be partly the result of predominantly transcendent images of God which precludes any experience of real relationship or mutuality. The images of God described by the women prior to making the Exercises are varied and multi-layered.

The images of God held by the women prior to their making the Exercises are described in a number of dominant ways. For the sake of discussion I have grouped them into four types of images; distant, negative, ambivalent, and positive. It is not possible to divide these images into four distinct categories as there is overlap. For example some of the positive images of God were still distant. However, while oversimplifying, it provides a useful frame for an initial presentation of the images of God held by the women prior to the Exercises.

#### **5.4.1 Distant/transcendent pre-Exercises images of God**

The first group of images is of a God who is benevolent but distant or remote and with whom there can be no personal relationship. One woman whose experience falls in this cluster said, “At school we were brought up Pre-Vatican II. You approached God as a sinner and pleaded with him. He was up there and you were down there and there was never any real communication” (Int. 8). Another (Int. 1) described God as “at a distance, a formal God...someone who you went to when you were in a panic when things were bad who was going to fix things” and later said, “Before I made the Exercises I had a sense that this was someone who was ok and who I would like to know, but you know I think there was this element of feeling that that only happens for some people and not me...” This transcendent image of a God who is powerful but remote, seems to have been an obstacle to a relational experience for God. She says “It wasn’t a God I knew- as I say I couldn’t say I love God” (Int. 1).

Another woman interviewed near the beginning of the Second Week of the Exercises said,

He just is and he knows everything, so in my trying to place him as caring for me unconditionally and giving me his love, it wasn’t that I didn’t believe he would or could. It was just maybe that I had never learnt to sit on his knee. He wasn’t scary. He wasn’t cross with me... he was distant, very distant. Just in that I had never connected (D. Int. 3).

She struggled to understand how she could have been so involved in church and ministry and yet never have connected relationally to God. She had worked from a conceptual understanding of God’s love, but had never experienced it herself.

#### 5.4.2 Ambivalent or mixed images of God

A woman in her fifties who had a difficult childhood described her pre-Exercises image of God in predominantly negative terms. Her significant early experience was of her mother's death when she was nine. Her father became an alcoholic and remarried a woman who was punitive towards her. She describes a God who is judgmental, omniscient and punitive. She spoke about "this big man with a sjambok (whip) who will just sjambok me if I do anything wrong" (Int. 10). However one also sees the influence of a mitigating image of God which, while distant, is less punitive.

I was at Primary school and we were taught about God there. Sr Alphonse used to look after me-she was interested in my education, We had classes after school when she taught us how to pray. She showed love and care. At that time I just knew God as this person far away in the clouds and he was watching my every move. He would be happy if I went to church and said my prayers-more like a distant father (Int.10).

It may be that the positive experience of her interaction with Sr Alphonse contributed to a latent more positive image of God as something in her experience allowed her to feel drawn to make a Week of Guided Prayer.<sup>78</sup> She was adamant however that "I used to go to church regularly, yes, but I did not have a relationship with Him. I was doing what I was taught, but there was no relationship. I was just doing my duty" (Int.10).

Most often described are ambivalent or mixed images of a God who is simultaneously loving and punitive. Ambivalent images of God prior to the Exercises were particularly strong for four of the women. Strikingly one of the women in her mid-fifties described her Pre-Exercises image of God as a God of whom she was afraid.

He was very ambiguous... because on the one hand he loved and on the other hand he slaughtered...you know in the Old Testament. There was a lot of ambiguity there and it was difficult to trust a God who I did not know where I stood with him as he seemed to change his spots sort of thing (Int. 6).

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<sup>78</sup> A Week of Guided Prayer is a parish retreat in daily life which is usually individually guided.

She attributes the way she experienced God to her Baptist upbringing and to her relationship with her father, providing clear evidence for the way in which representations of God are partly dependent on the experience and representations of parents.

I thought it could have been with the ambiguity of my relationship with my father. He drank a lot and he was in and out of our lives. We used to hide under the trees from him. You know that fear affected me. And I think a lot of the teaching in the Baptist church. The Baptist teachings are quite heavy on that side (Int. 6).

Another woman who came into the Exercises with an ambivalent image of God was a woman in her mid-twenties. She was diagnosed with a chronic illness at age sixteen and spent over eighteen months in bed. During that time she had a powerfully consoling experience of God in prayer in which she described herself as “filled with the love, joy and peace of God” (Int. 5). She said after her consoling experience of God in prayer,

I have never doubted the existence of God since then. God accepted me in all my brokenness. He then let me know that my illness would not go away straight away but would be a way for me to build a deep foundation in God (Int. 5).

However, the experience of several relapses over the subsequent years after she had initially recovered, made her doubt whether God really was loving and caring. Her parent’s divorce in her later teens and her related anger with her father seem to also have contributed to a negative image of God. The doubt in God’s love and care co-existed with a contradictory sense of trust which had been the fruit of the significant prayer experience.

A woman who celebrated her sixtieth birthday while making the Exercises reflected on the confusing and ambivalent nature of her image of God prior to making the Exercises.

God was a confusing image, a punishing judge who took away everything and everyone I loved or attached to, and yet someone or something that I tried to please and love. The confusing image comes in early teens as I read the Imelda booklets, distributed The Africa and Far East magazines and connected to the God calling me to something else. I learned to love

and answer the one who was also judging me. I know that God is not a punishing, judging God, but a loving, caring God but I had no real experience of such. I had experiences of God staying with me despite my deviations but in the image of a beneficent person to whom one is indebted (Int. 14).

This woman acknowledges a discrepancy between her intellectual or conscious knowledge of God as loving and caring and her emotional or less conscious experience of a punishing judge whom she was bound to love. Her experience of relating to God prior to the Exercises is one which has almost abusive overtones in the sense of feeling compelled to love despite her experience of God as depriving and punitive. There is also a gap between her professed image of God who she believes intellectually is good and loving, and her operative image of God as depriving and punitive.

#### **5.4.3 Positive pre-Exercises images of God**

A few women reported coming into the Exercises with a positive image of God. One said: I haven't ever had a very negative image of God. It's been a very ordinary image" (Int. 9). These women talk in terms of a consoling sense of a God who cares. "I can't remember how far back it goes. It seems like from when I was in high school it was more of a questing thing this longing to be closer" (Int.12) and another "For me I just knew that God was part of my life and that awareness gradually grew in depth" (Int.13). However these images of God, though positive and consoling, were relatively undeveloped when contrasted with the personal intimacy and depth of relationship with God which they describe as developing in the course of making the Exercises.

### **5.5 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PRE-EXERCISES IMAGES OF GOD**

All the women interviewed had a masculine image of God at the time of beginning the Exercises.<sup>79</sup> This may well be as a result of the dominant masculine images of God in

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<sup>79</sup> One woman (Int. 15) had had a dream in which she had experienced a female image of God in the form of Jesus as a woman on the cross but had suppressed this experience prior to her experience in spiritual direction believing it to be wrong.

their experience of church, given that the language used in the liturgy is masculine. They may never previously have been exposed to feminine images of God.

The images of God of the women interviewed appear to be have been influenced sometimes positively and sometimes negatively by their experience of their parents, especially their fathers. One woman in her late forties described her relationship with her father as having impacted negatively on her ability to experience God as a loving father.

I could never be good enough. Even to this day my dad says stuff to me and I cringe. That relationship has never developed into anything good, anything beautiful. I think it was pretty clear that it was connected to this distanced God. And also my dad has very strong opinions. He never listened to any story I was bringing to him, he just turned it into whatever he was thinking. So to come to God in the beginning with all this stuff, knowing that he is my father and why should he be different to the one I know (D. Int. 3).

However, significantly, other experiences and relationships for example catechetics, bible school, a particularly caring teacher, or a grand-parent are often perceived by the woman as having had more influence on the development of her God-image and relationship with God than her experience of and relationship with her parents. All the women who mentioned this described these extra-parental relationships as having a positive influence on their image of God and relationship with God. Although one woman (Int. 3) had an experience of catechesis which presented a very negative image of God, this was mitigated by a significant and positive relationship with her grandmother.

One woman whose experience illustrates the mix of influences which contribute to early formation of the God-representation or image of God was a middle-aged woman with children who had a difficult relationship with her father.

As a child I always just believed God was there. My Sunday school experience was very strong and biblically based, we had vacation Bible schools and it impacted me in a positive way. My dad was a military man. He ran our home along military lines. I rebelled against that...My mother wouldn't oppose him in front of us, but I think it was really terrible for her (Int. 12).

Despite this she says she does not believe her image of God was impacted negatively by her experience of her father. It may be that splitting is occurring here and that she projected all the bad onto her father and the good onto God. Alternatively the ‘wished-for parent’ of her imagination may have been more strongly used in the formation of her God-image.

Even though my father was like that I never thought that it damaged my image of God as Father. I actually think underneath my dad thought he was trying hard, I just thought he did it really badly. That didn’t damage my image of who God was. I had just such a different image of him. I think it was of what I thought a Father should be (Int. 12).

Another woman said that although her parents practiced their faith it was her grandmother that was significant in her coming to know God as real ‘because for me it really felt like God was real to her’ (Int. 13). There is a vicarious experience of God through the mind of the grandmother.

For yet another woman in her mid-forties it was her experience of catechetics which mitigated the negative impact of her parents’ images of God.

Both my parents had quite dysfunctional images of God-they were old school Catholic. It did impact on me. I was very grounded in it but I was also lucky. My catechism teachers were post-Vatican II...In confirmation classes –to my parents horror we did not study doctrine-it was all about experience and feelings (Int. 4).

A woman who made the Exercises in her late forties described a difficult relationship with her parents who undermined her and neglected her emotionally. However her early image of God was also shaped by her grandmother with whom she had a very good relationship.

My gran was my everything and she stayed about 50 metres away from us and she used to listen on the radio to a morning service and in the holidays if I went over there she would put her arm around me and we would cuddle while she listened to the service on her little transistor radio and at the end when they would pray the Our Father she would say to me ‘you must always pray the Our Father as well and even today I do that. I was my gran’s favorite grandchild and when I look back now I see so much of Christ in my gran. They took me to church with them most Sundays and my gran ran a little Sunday school at her house (Int. 15).

A young woman (Int. 2) whose experience is so striking that I have described the shift in her image of God in some detail in the section on *Shifts in image of God and Self* had a dual image of God as the powerless, depleted Creator and the suffering Jesus of the passion. Her own sense of being a disempowered victim is projected onto her image of God. For her there is not a sense of remoteness. She describes a strongly developed relationship, but this relationship happens in relation to a distorted image of God. She feels she needs to care for him because he is so vulnerable, hurt and depleted.

Also significant in the experience of many of the women interviewed was the often recurring sense of a demanding God whose love and favour was conditional on what the woman did. One middle-aged woman who was responsible for a large prayer ministry felt strongly that God's love for her was conditional, even though intellectually she knew that this was not the case. She was able in her prayer ministry and prayer counseling to help others to encounter God's unconditional love. In her own life however she struggled to experience a God whose love was not contingent on her performance. In trying to understand why, she said "I think maybe it was having to earn love in the past from people and I tended to think of God in the same way" (Int. 7).

It is evident that for many of these women there is a split between their intellectual understanding of God's unconditional love and their emotional struggle to experience that as being true for them. It seems that their experience of having to earn love in other significant relationships impacts significantly on their image of God. Describing her image of God prior to making the Exercises a woman, aged sixty from a conservative Catholic upbringing who had spent some years as a nun before leaving said,

I had experiences of God staying with me despite my deviations but in the image of a beneficent person to whom one is indebted and always has to meet the demands and expectations. I never really met those expectations. I never found that secret 'will of God' for my life (Int. 14).

## **5.6 REPORTED SHIFTS IN IMAGE OF GOD IN THE EXERCISES PROCESS**

### **5.6.1 Shifts into relational images**

The shift in image of God in the Exercises is very often identified by the women as the most significant aspect of their experience along with the corresponding shifts in image of self which I will describe in the subsequent section. When asked simply “What was most significant for you in the experience of making the Exercises?” the women most frequently answered in terms of a positive shift in their relationship with God which is described in terms of a new level of intimacy. This was linked to, and I would argue, a direct consequence of the sometimes dramatic shift in their image of God. As one woman said, “For me the greatest thing was the change in my image of God” (Int. 6). Another said “There was a huge shift because before the Exercises God was that God out there and you had to be good and perfect and all the rest of it” (Int. 13.). The images of a remote, punitive, and in one case helpless God which they had held to varying degrees prior to the Exercises had seemingly previously precluded to a large extent any possibility of the development of an intimate relationship. It may be that the sense of God as distant made it difficult for the women to really feel that God could identify with their experience and be engaged with the real concerns and longings in the everyday circumstances and experiences of their lives.

The women all describe the shift in their image of God using the language of encounter and describe discovering<sup>80</sup> an intimate relationship with one or more persons of the Trinity. This contrasts with their experience prior to making the Exercises, which most describe in terms of a lack of the intimacy and personal relationship which they found in the process of the Exercises. One woman said “for a long time I had the sense that I didn’t really know God. I couldn’t honestly say “I love you” about God before I made the Exercises. I know it was the things we said in prayers and all the rest of it but it wasn’t true for me. I knew there has to be this something more and I didn’t find it until then (Int. 1). In the Exercises she described

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<sup>80</sup> Or in a few cases deepening.

meeting Jesus in the experience of Gospel Contemplation. "...and so I met Jesus who I had never met before actually and here was this real person and yes I suppose one could say a love-affair began" (Int. 1).

Another woman describes as her image of God which grew in the Exercises in the relational terms of my "Beloved and my Friend" and at a later point in the interview locates God as "right here inside of me" (Int. 7). Similarly a woman in the same age-group who, prior to making the Exercises had seen God as remote, describes a new closeness: "It's like if I am with my husband-we don't have to say anything-we are just comfortable together. I feel kind of enfolded by love" (Int. 10).

The shift in image of God is to one of a God who loves unconditionally and who desires my good. The woman who had seen God as brandishing a sjambok said,

With the Exercises I discovered that God loves me-he is not that horrible man who is just waiting for me to step out of line. He doesn't want to see me suffering-and I think of the scripture of Jeremiah where he says 'I know the plans I have for you-plans for peace and not disaster, reserving for you a future and a hope.' He wants me to be happy and prosperous-and by prosperous I don't mean money things (Int. 10).

This shift from a distant and punitive image of God to an image of God who cares personally for me is especially potent given this woman's life-experience which includes considerable suffering. Her mother died when she was nine and she was raised by an alcoholic father and an abusive step-mother. Her husband committed suicide, her sister died in a car accident and she lost her only daughter in the AIDS pandemic.

A woman who had felt God was distant and conditionally loving said "I now see God as a real living person calling me to him" (Int. 15).

I also interviewed women at different points in the Exercises process. These interviews confirmed some of the findings of the retrospective interviews with regard to the desire for intimacy with God. One woman interviewed during her experience of the First Week said, "I guess what has changed in the way I relate to God is that I

used to experience God as quite impersonal. That is changing for me. There is a sense of closeness growing” (D. Int. 2).

Another woman interviewed in the initial stages of making the Exercises said,

I don't know that I have that much intimacy with God...I battle to think of God as father...I didn't have a big-stick image of God. Not a punishing God but not a close God either...I think you have to give a face to something if you want to be intimate. (D. Int. 1).

She described her biggest problem as being a fear of intimacy following her experience of a painful divorce. “After the pain of the divorce I don't think I will ever allow anyone in close. In my heart of hearts I know I need to take the wall down particularly in my prayer times.” (D. Int. 1) Interviewed several months later during the Third Week of the Exercises she was struggling to stay in the process. She felt that she was resisting prayer and retreating into her intellect. She said, “The Exercises were scary. They threatened that (her retreat from intimacy). It would have given me too much to deal with to become seriously intimate with God” (D. Int. 1b).

Even this example of a woman struggling with the process and resisting because of the intimacy which she feared, attests in a different way to the powerful way in which the process facilitates the development of an intimacy or closeness between God and the retreatant. She can feel that she is being drawn by the process into a closeness for which she does not yet feel ready.

One young woman in her late twenties from a Reformed church background was interviewed during the first weeks of making the Exercises but after two years of spiritual direction and Ignatian methods of prayer. She said “I don't think my knowledge idea of God has changed as much as my experience of God has changed, I always knew in my head that God was very kind and loving and gentle but I had never experienced that” (D. Int. 4).

### **5.6.2 Shifts from masculine to feminine images of God.**

For three of the women there is a shift from a previously masculine image of God to a predominantly feminine image of God. This process happened for a woman in her forties. Her previous image of God was male “like a white Irish Catholic priest.” During the process of the Exercises, both her image of God as Creator and her image of Jesus shifted to female images. She describes the shift in her image of God in this way:

Yes, seeing God as a woman developed slowly especially in the prayers about Creation. I saw God in a more fertile aspect. Somehow I relate men to manufacturing things and women more to growing and nurturing things. Maybe it is because I am a mother. I went in praying to God as a loving father-but when I got deeply into the prayer I was always connecting with a more Mother feel. It was also that passage from Hosea about ‘leading strings of love,’ There was the sense of a child starting to walk and the mother hovering to help (Int. 4).

She also described her image of Jesus changing in the Gospel Contemplation of the Visit to Bethany.

I’m not sure if I had prayed it before but I had thought about it and always had related more to Mary-in my family I am the bad housewife and I saw Martha as a perfectionist. Now when I prayed it in the Exercises, I was drawn to Martha. In the prayer I was busy helping Martha and after we had finished the housework we went to sit with Jesus. I said ‘you don’t understand what it is like to be a woman’ and there in front of us Jesus said “But I do” and he took on a female form. It was very powerful (Int. 4).

This shift is striking. It seems that the imaginative prayer allows new previously dormant possible images to emerge. As the woman allowed herself to enter the imaginative prayer more maternal images emerged. As a mother she was able to identify herself more easily with these images. Her own relationships with both parents are described as close and unconflicted so in her case the shift to feminine images of God does not appear to be related to a difficulty with the father image. Rather the feminine images perhaps function to validate her experience as a woman and a mother.

The other woman who describes a shift from masculine to feminine images of God struggled in her relationship with her father after he divorced her mother when she was in her late teens. This image of God was also connected to a sense of a God (and human father) for whom she felt she had to perform, and whose love was contingent on her 'doing' and achieving. Prior to making the Exercises she describes having been through a process of learning to trust 'this God-the-Father image more-that he wouldn't demand more from me more than I could handle-that he wouldn't need me to perform and do things as my father did' (Int. 5). She describes a shift to a Sophia (feminine wisdom) image, a maternal image which she says "was healing and comforting", as 'one who succors and supports and is not demanding.' She said, "I could trust this image because I could trust my own mother" (Int. 5). When she began to imagine or sense God in feminine terms she was able to draw on the trustworthy and undemanding experience of her own mother in creating and discovering a feminine image of God.

The third woman whose image of God shifted from masculine to feminine is discussed as a case study later in this chapter.

## **5.7 SHIFTS IN IMAGE OF SELF**

The women interviewed also described a shift in image of self. Image of God and image of self were integrally connected and shifts in image of God and relationship with God correlated with shifts in way the women experience themselves. The shifts were often described as involving a sense of self-acceptance and a new self-confidence. For some women the shift was very marked whereas others described less dramatic shifts. One woman in her late forties said, "my image of myself did not change dramatically but what happened was that I was able to know myself better and accept myself and have confidence in myself. I had done self-help, self-growth stuff where this personal growth came up, but only in the Exercises was it sustainable" (Int. 4).

Another woman in her late fifties spoke about her experience of Gospel Contemplation saying that as she became part of those stories she changed. "My

desire for recognition of people died very much. Maybe before I needed it to affirm that I was ok and it was like that changed” and later in the interview, “I feel the fact that He, the King of Kings, accepted me meant I could accept myself. Maybe I am a little bit of a competitive person but I came to a freedom to not have to compete with anything or anyone” (Int. 7). A woman in her fifties spoke of being a shy person but that the experience of making the Exercises had made her more confident. “I’m not afraid to stand and talk about God at our section meetings. Well I wouldn’t call it preaching but sharing on the scriptures. I find that I am brave enough to do that –to read a scripture and to talk about it. I am brave enough to start the hymn in church. Whatever I do I know it is for God” (Int. 10).

A professional woman with a high profile job in academia also described becoming more confident. She connects this shift in her experience of herself to a deepened relationship with God and to a realization that she is not alone. She is able to sense the relationship even outside of her prayer times and to feel supported and affirmed by that presence.

It has changed my whole outlook. I have become more confident and I feel much more supported. I became aware of the felt presence of God and because I could talk to him there was someone who could bolster me and keep me on track. Yes it changed my whole perception of myself. I feel at peace with myself. I wanted to be my real self and not the person I have had to create in my work world and social world. I wanted to connect to when I was a young person and more open and able to connect. I have become more confident. I have always been confident at work but not at social gatherings. But now when you have God to go with it’s so much easier. I want to talk to people to see how they are and there is usually positive feedback-they are happy to see me. Not so long ago I would hate to walk into a room with a party going on even if I knew the people well. It has been a freeing experience. Even though things are crazy at work I feel quite relaxed. The Lord will provide. I used to really worry about all these things but does it really matter in the end? (Int. 8).

The women describe their image of self prior to making the Exercises very much in relation to trying to please those around them and of feeling that their worth was dependent on the approval of others. For most their identity seems strongly tied to earning that approval, whether of God, their parents, husband or children.

I think for me most of my life there had been the sense of not fully accepting who I am, always striving to be what I think other people wanted me to be. There was the sense of being a bit like a chameleon and frantically trying to fit the occasion and still feeling like you didn't fit in, whereas now I suppose that most of the time its ok to be who I am I'm comfortable with who I am (Int. 12).

The strong defensive stances which many of these women describe seem to be strongly rooted in early childhood experiences and previously resistant to change. Another woman describes two of her 'inner selves,' her good little girl and her inner rebel. She had previously only felt able to relate to God out of her 'good little girl' self. Her realization in the process of the Exercises that God does not want her to feel inferior or need her to be good and right to be loved and accepted by God enabled her to allow other inner selves to have space.

I have changed primarily in recognizing that my feelings of inferiority are not of God, and only serve to take me away. I also recognize my need to control, to "do right", comes from a need to be accepted and I do not do stuff to get God to say I am ok! I recognize my own internal conflict between my "good little girl" doing what is expected and my rebel, and somehow I took her with me after the Exercises! Consistent direction focusing on God's delight in me, reflection and reviews were the keys (Int.14).

The shift in image of self is towards greater autonomy and the ability to set appropriate boundaries in relationships.

A married woman in her early fifties said:

I am discovering more and more and more that I can do things I never thought I could do. That I can actually stand up to my husband-that went against everything I have always imagined. That I have a right in life to make choices for myself (Int. 15).

When asked if this had an empowering sense for her she said emphatically "Yes in capital letters, in capital letters."

## 5.8 SHIFTS IN IMAGE OF GOD AND IMAGE OF SELF

It was strongly evident in the interviews that shifts in image of God have a profound impact on image of self. Many of the women when asked to describe any shifts they had noticed in themselves in making the Exercises, explicitly made that link.

If I went back to the Exercises I think for me there was a definite sense of being passionately in love with God which was very different to anything I had ever experienced before-that probably brought a lot of the intimacy with it-so I suppose that does shift how you perceive yourself. And I think the whole way through in terms of this whole journey since I felt that sense of being drawn and being called closer to God there has been a deepening sense of acceptance of myself (Int.12).

One of the most striking shifts in image of God and self is described by a young woman (24 at the time of making the Exercises), who writes that her dominant images of God were of the Creator depleted and exhausted by his unreciprocated love for humanity and of the suffering Jesus on the Cross. This image of God was strongly tied to an extremely negative image of self as the one who depletes God's life and energy and who carries responsibility for his pain. Her childhood was spent caring for her terminally ill father and for other elderly relatives who were dying. Her own feelings of depletion and exhaustion, in a situation of giving out constant energy and care as a child to sick adults, is taken in as part of what forms her God-representation. While praying the meditation of the Principle and Foundation she was given a supporting text 'You are God's work of Art.' In spending time internalizing that image of God as Creator and herself as his work of Art something begins to shift internally. She has been created by God as something beautiful-a work of art. In praying the Principle and Foundation she experiences "a God of abundance and delight in whose eyes she is beautiful and delightful." The shift in her image of God generates a powerful corresponding shift in her image of herself. In place of the pervasive sense of guilt for her existence, she experiences herself as one in whom God delights. If God delights in her then she does not have to make reparation for her existence.

Her dominant image of Jesus as the Crucified Christ begins to shift in the Gospel Contemplation on the temptations in the desert. The contemplation is about her meeting Jesus in the desert. She encounters there for the first time an alive, joyous,

playful Jesus who was able to nurture her and who sat with her rubbing her feet and talking and laughing with her. She encountered a Jesus who did not need her to care for him as she had always needed to care for so many others. The experience of entering into Gospel Contemplation created a space for that shift to take place. From a psychological point of view one would question why that space did not merely reinforce and expand her existing God-representation. It would have seemed more likely given her previous image of Jesus that she would have encountered him, starving and suffering from temptations in the desert, needing her to support and comfort him. Something unexpected happens in that space. Christ encounters her precisely at her place of greatest need. A young woman, overburdened and over-responsible encounters Jesus as one who can be with her in a relaxed, fun way and who can nurture her as she has not been nurtured. “Meeting someone (Jesus in her contemplation) who was fully alive, delightful...It was the opposite of the passion experience. I felt this is someone I just want to spend oodles and oodles of time with. This is kind of like the feeling children get in the Narnia stories when they think Aslan is just around the corner and they can’t wait to see him” (Int. 2).

## **5.9 HOW DO THESE SHIFTS HAPPEN? THE ROLE OF IMAGINATIVE AND DIALOGICAL PRAYER**

In the interviews I asked questions to try to explore the ‘how’ of the shifts in image of God and self. It seemed evident that as image of God began to shift the experience between the retreatant and God became increasingly relational. The move towards relationship seemed to be facilitated by the use of the imagination in Gospel Contemplation and colloquy. As the initial interviews pointed to imaginative prayer as key I wanted understand better how imaginative prayer functioned to shift image of God and self and whether other relational dimensions of the Exercises such as the relationship with the director played a significant role. The shift in image of God seems either to happen through an encounter or series of encounters which replace the former image with an image which is either diametrically opposed to that of the Pre-Exercises image of God, or in which a nascent positive image is affirmed and strengthened. The shift seems to happen in the prayer experience. Most of the women attribute the shift in image of God and relationship with God to the experience of

Gospel Contemplation. Some of them attribute it to the colloquy arising out of *Lectio Divina* which is also an imaginal dialogical exercise.

At the start of the time of prayer, depending on where the retreatant is in the process of the Exercises, a particular grace or gift is actively prayed for. This is the movement of the person responding to God's invitation to dialogue with her own desire. The person's own situation is brought into dialogue both with the story and its characters but also more significantly with God, who as an independent actor engages with the person who has now explicitly opened themselves to that dialogue through the medium of the story which on a theological level is made present through the prayer. The story provides a containing frame for the encounter. One woman in describing her imaginative prayer spoke of "my imagination like a doorway into a deeper relationship" (Int.7).

Many of the women described a process of coming to know Jesus as a 'real' person. The sense of a transcendent God, with whom it is unimaginable to have a personal and close relationship, changes in the context of on-going imaginal encounters. When asked what happened for her in the imaginative prayer conversation one woman said,

For me it seems to become-though it didn't always happen- when it was special and it felt like I was really connected there would be a definite sense of me talking, really dialoguing with Jesus or Mary or God and there was a great sense of intimacy, a real sense of presence and just kind of closeness. I don't know what else to say except that it feels very real (Int. 11).

Some women spoke of never really having taken Jesus's humanity seriously prior to the Exercises and said that the experience of praying with the infancy narratives and the events of his life were significant in enabling them to engage with the human Jesus.

In order to pray the material of the Exercises at least an hour was spent by the women almost everyday for at least nine months. The developmental interviews with those at the early stages of their Exercises journey reveal the women moving from a space of 'saying prayers' and attending liturgies to taking a full hour most days to spend time alone with God. "I know that I need to set aside the full hour. When I do that – when I

give it the full time I can really get deeper into it.” (D. Int. 1) and another said “It helps to spend the full hour as I find that most of the significant insights tend to come right at the end of the hour-by which time I am bored. If I had cut the prayer short I would have missed out” (D. Int. 2). One woman who completed the Exercises ten years ago describes needing longer chunks of time less frequently saying “I needed time and at that stage the way I was praying was not everyday but a few days a week for big chunks of time which I realise really lent itself to that way of praying and so I met Jesus who I had never met before actually and here was this real person” (Int.1).

One woman in reflecting on why Gospel Contemplation is particularly helpful for her said:

Apart from asking for the grace there is no ‘goal’, no particular point to be reached, nothing one can really strive for or achieve in this kind of prayer. One does not know where it will go. In a sense one does not know what it is one has to try to succeed in doing. This combined with fact that I fairly easily became immersed in the ‘event’, and in a sense was on another plain, I think allowed defenses to drop so that there could be ‘movement’. I think for me Gospel Contemplation is a kind of subversive way of getting me to surrender (Int. 1).

For some women the experience of imaginative contemplation enabled them to move deeper than the level of intellectual understanding to the level of personal experience and relationship.

I used to believe that I had to read the Bible-and it was kind of like a works programme-but this Ignatian way of praying with scripture touches something much deeper. You can have all the head knowledge and none of the heart knowledge. And now just taking a Gospel story and living in it and connecting with Him through it has changed me (Int. 7).

Another woman interviewed said “With the gift of my imagination I can just sit and I can almost envisage and feel God just holding me” (Int. 15). She explained that she now sees prayer as a conversation which she can have with God as anytime.

The most significant experiences of shift in image of God in Gospel Contemplation were very often in relation to a scripture text in which it is a woman who encounters Jesus. Mary Magdalene at the Tomb, the Samaritan Women at the Well and the

Nativity of Jesus are three of the key texts which recur. The story of Martha and Mary is another which is mentioned by a number of the women as particularly significant. This is interesting. Perhaps women relate most easily to the experiences of another woman. This has implications for the giving of the Exercises in which the passages recommended by Ignatius for contemplation do not in fact recommend any of these. Directors seem however to take the freedom to choose passages which they think may be helpful to the directee, not allowing themselves to be straight-jacketed by the text.

Many experiences of Gospel Contemplation are low-key and may shift the relationship only marginally. Perhaps the function of such prayer is to prepare the retreatant for the key moments of encounter or simply to be the incremental building blocks of the developing relationship. One woman emphasized this. After sharing the most significant of the prayer experiences she tried to remember other prayer experiences in the Exercises, which though not pivotal, she felt were still important. She said:

There were a lot of other important prayer times...It made a big impact for me. I think you don't always remember until you go (back) to a specific story then it brings back those memories again because I think what happens is that it becomes part of you and one's response to Jesus already so you don't take it apart all the time. It is part of who you are now because you are not the same anymore (Int. 11).

The most significant experiences which fundamentally shift a retreatant at a deep emotional and spiritual level are encounters in which what unfolds is both surprising and unexpected either in timing or content and meets the retreatant at the place of their deepest need in that moment be it psychological or spiritual. The moment of encounter is reportedly so unexpected and powerful that it cannot be doubted by the retreatant or written off as wishful thinking. They experience its impact as indelibly imprinted on them because the intensity or timing. There is a sense of God intervening at a depth or in a manner more profound than any the retreatant could have foreseen or simply imagined.

One woman who made the Exercises in her early forties provided by e-mail a deeply moving account of her experience of praying the Third Week of the Exercises in which one can observe a key shift in her experience.

For me Jesus's experience in Gethsemene was the height of his agony. It was the moment at which he, as man, willed radically, utterly to do God's will: the moment of total self giving. Every human instinct, every fibre of his being, revolted against this walking into death, this handing over of self. Every understanding of 'loving' Father cried out at this seeming contradiction – "a loving God could allow this?" Every last vestige of faith was drawn on to remain faithful to what/who he had come to know, to trust himself to the Other for apparent destruction. So in the moment of accepting the will of God, the 'self' sacrifice was made and all that followed was 'simply' the playing out of that. It seemed to me that, in that moment of knowing that the cup would not pass away and that he was being asked to do this, the emotional/spiritual agony was far worse than the physical pain that followed. In the prayer (as far as I can remember) the apostles did not feature. It was all about, observing, 'knowing' the agony and faithfulness of Jesus. Praying the rest of the Passion was vivid but difficult, in that I found it very hard to do any sort of colloquy / 'communicating' – a sense of how can one expect a person in so much pain to communicate, to do anything except struggle for next breath. A sense, during crucifixion, of really knowing, at conscious level and at felt level that I loved Jesus deeply. This was new to me. But also, at this point great fear that the love I had for him was not returned with same intensity. (I know now why this was but I did not then.) I was unable to look into eyes of Jesus for fear of seeing this. It would have been annihilation.

My director eventually moved me on to the Burial. At the burial Mary, his mother was there. She had not featured much in the Exercises to this point – not even in colloquies. I watched. I saw. I wept quietly – standing back-unobserved I thought. But she came to me and said. 'Take him. Hold him. He loved you.' And all was right. The gentle surprise of her coming to me and of her telling what I need to hear when I was no longer looking for it, unsolicited, made the gift of what she said authentic, believable, not some sort of auto suggestion. I did not analyze it in this way at the time. I was simply aware of the gift...The awareness of felt love for Jesus and the intensity of that love, was a new experience – and a gift. Then the surprising affirmation of that love being reciprocated was a greater gift. It was in some way the gift of life (Int. 1 by email).

Her account gives a strong sense of the depth at which the retreatant was able through her imagination to enter empathically into the emotional and spiritual agony of Jesus in Gethsemene and, in sharing that experience with him, experienced within herself a deepening intimacy with him. The colloquy during the carrying of cross and crucifixion was not verbal. It was an experience of being intensely emotionally present to Jesus and in that coming to a realization that she loved him deeply. (When in the interview process the retreatant reflected back on her fear that her love for Jesus might not be reciprocated with the same intensity, she became aware that this had

been the situation with her mother. Her mother was so enmeshed with her own mother that there was little space for loving her children and the retreatant had spent her early life wishing that her mother would return her love.) In the Gospel Contemplation on the burial there is a moment of encounter when Mary offers her the body and tells her “Take him, hold him. He loved you.” She is told, at a moment when she was not expecting it, exactly what she most deeply needed to hear.

Another middle-aged woman with grown children shared her Gospel Contemplation on the Nativity of Jesus. This is an account of her experience taken directly from her prayer journal at the time of making the Exercises. This was a prayer repetition<sup>81</sup> of a Gospel Contemplation on the nativity of Jesus.

I am going back to visit the little family in the cave - this time to really talk to them, see if that same sense/presence of love, purity and joy is still there and to really look at that baby! As I go down the hillside towards the cave so many thoughts and impressions go through my mind. What did the shepherds mean? What did Joseph mean - this is Jesus Son of the Most High? I go slowly into the cave not wanting to disturb - but they call me over - pleased to see me - I hand over my offering of food - Mary is just finishing feeding Jesus - he is very peaceful just holding her finger, looking up at her suckling gently. She finishes, changes him then goes away to boil some water and freshen up - and Joseph has Jesus. He walks around patting him, burping him, loving him, talking/cooing to him - seems so much more involved than a father of that time, - possibly because of the circumstances. Jesus looks so tiny, so perfect, so fragile against this big, burly man's shoulder! Mary comes back, asks if I would like to hold him - my heart swells to bursting with love - I rock him gently looking at him, loving him - such beautiful eyes, all knowing all loving even though he is a baby - so vulnerable - he holds my finger and sighs gently! This is my saviour I am holding - "the son of the most high" - what an amazing moment - now I know why those shepherds knelt in worship! Mary takes him from me as his eyes close and puts him in the manger and we talk and she tells me her story. My heart and soul swell with certainty, joy, love as she speaks - God's presence is overwhelming - what love! (Int. 11 by email).

All the woman's faculties are engaged in the process of the prayer; her intellect, her imagination, her senses and her feelings. As she begins the prayer she is occupied with thoughts, with trying to grasp with her intellect more of what this means. There

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<sup>81</sup> Ignatius advises the retreatant pray with the same text but to go back to and “dwell upon those points in which we have experienced greater consolation or desolation or greater spiritual appreciation.” (Sp. Exx. 62)

is an internal dialogue as she engages mentally with her previous experience of praying that nativity. As soon as she enters the cave she is engaged in imaginal interaction and dialogue with Mary, Joseph and the baby. At the beginning she watches the interaction as an engaged observer. She moves even deeper into the prayer at the point where Mary invites her to hold the baby. She not only sees the vulnerability of the child but feels him holding her finger. The experience of encountering and engaging with the family evokes a strong feeling response of “certainty, joy and love.”

She ends her experience of Gospel Contemplation with a colloquy with the Father and with Jesus.

Thank You Father, - Thank You - You sent your Son, a part of You to come to earth as that tiny, warm, vulnerable little baby! Such love is overwhelming! My Saviour lying in that straw filled little manger - a wooden manger - all love, all light, all truth lying there. It is a mystery all inspiring all overwhelming, all powerful!- also every time I acknowledge You it is as if that love is born anew - You are born again and anew. You keep being incarnated into the world! Please come Lord Jesus in love, joy, truth, light! (Int 12 by email).

Some of the women were less easily able to engage with Gospel Contemplation, finding it difficult to visualize the scene and to imagine themselves taking part in it. However a similar process seems to take place for women using other ways of connecting with an imaginal and dialogical experience of Jesus. The idea of using letter writing as means of praying a Gospel Contemplation was pivotal to the experience of one of the women. She described finding Gospel Contemplation very difficult. Her director saw that she was not managing to get into the Gospel Contemplation and suggested she might try writing letters as a different way in.

She (her director) gave me a way of doing it through writing letters me to Jesus or Mary or whoever might have been involved in whatever story we were in and that was priceless for me. I loved doing that because the most wonderful things came out of that. For instance the first one I did was at the Wedding at Cana. I had Jesus write to me first and when he wrote to me he said I wish you could have been there because I could have imagined dancing with you. It would have just been so nice and that was an important thing and I responded and said I really wished I could have been there. I had lain out these clothes. I actually imagined them and so those letters turned him into a person for me. I actually think I fell in love

with the man, that if he had been here, I would have been desperately in love with him and that carried me for such a long time and that for me was what really stuck out. He was so real. I never imagined what he looked like but he was so real for me as a person. It changed the relationship completely and maybe something I don't know but maybe something which as a woman I really needed. To feel that and it was really very important and in fact it was so important that when it got to the post-resurrection I felt quite bereft (Int.11).

Another woman in her late fifties with grown children found that a remembered image from a film enabled her to enter into the Gospel Contemplation.

I battled to get in touch with Jesus's agony when I was praying with the passion. I battled to see him as a human being-was seeing him too much in his divinity. But I remembered an image from the film by Mel Gibson<sup>82</sup> and the picture which came to me was I saw Jesus standing alone in that room after he had been whipped and I just went up to him and I put my arms around him-didn't say anything but I felt I just have to comfort him. He has just got to know that there is somebody here for him (Int. 6).

In this case it seems that she was able to 'piggy-back' onto the imagination of the film director which enabled her to find a way of engaging with the human Jesus at this moment in the passion. This woman said that often films or pictures were important in helping her to engage with the texts. She spoke of the significance of an analogy of her relationship with her cat which was reinforced by a picture which her director gave her to contemplate.

One of the other important things was that intimacy. I shared it with my director. I had a cat, Leonardo and he used to come and lie on my head on my face at night and I used to hardly breathe. I didn't want him to move and God showed me that as much as I delighted in Leonardo just coming to rest his head on my cheek....He loves me that way, He did nothing for me, Leonardo, didn't give me any special treatment. I fed him and housed him-everything. But because he used to come and rest on my face I used to just love it and it was like God was saying to me that's how much I love you that you don't have to do anything for me but if you just rest your face on mine I am happy. And that cat was for a long time the way that I was able to remember when it was hard to believe that God could delight in my presence. And then my director gave me a picture of a shepherd with a lamb around his neck, and that was exactly what it was like for me with Leonardo-so that was a very significant picture-just that loveliness of the relationship and the intimacy. So that picture has been a very important for me – realising that God is intimately and passionately in

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<sup>82</sup> The Passion of the Christ

love with me and that if he does that for me he must do it for everyone”  
(Int. 6).

Entering into Imaginative Contemplation<sup>83</sup> for the first time can elicit competing voices even regarding the process. A woman interviewed at the beginning of the Second Week described her first experiences of Imaginative Contemplation with a sense of delight and excitement as she found her own experience and that of the Gospel encounter meshing and finding her own experiences validated. At the same time there is some tentativeness. There is a sense of having discovered something so amazing that she still half-wonders whether this way of praying is real or simply the product of her imagination. It seems to go against voices which she does not name but which are implicitly present which seek to inhibit her freedom to enter into the Gospel story with her own story.

When I met Mary for the first time it was very different. She had never really existed for me before. During the whole birth and the stable and holding Jesus it was really amazing how God took my own experience and I lived it with Mary’s story. I even met Joseph (laughing in a delighted way). *It was real*. I think like with a lot of Christian stuff if you are not brought up with it and familiar with it-sometimes I still have some doubt about the prayer “Did I make it up?” So it is a whole new like, a whole new way of being. Yes, even going with the Magi and looking for the star I found myself right in a retreat I had made a few years ago somewhere in Ntabazimbi. We had walked up the mountain that night to see the stars and I was journeying with these Magi going up there and I was like Oh is this ok? Am I allowed to be thinking these things? (D. Int. 3).

A woman who made the Exercises in her late-forties talked about the importance for her of having Mary as a role model. “Like when I am struggling with my own children I can go back and say to Mary how do I do this, how do I say this, how do I understand where my own child is coming from?” (Int.15).

As described in earlier chapters the colloquy is the heart to heart conversation or dialogue between the person and Jesus, the Father or Mary at the end of a particular time of prayer. At some points for example at the end of the First Week Meditations

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<sup>83</sup> I use this term interchangeably with Gospel Contemplation. Each of these terms highlights a different aspect of an identical process, the imaginative and the use of the Gospel both of which are vitally important.

the colloquy is with Jesus on the Cross. During the so-called *Triple Colloquy* there is dialogue with Mary who leads the directee to Jesus and then with Jesus who takes the directee to dialogue with the Father. Although the set colloquies are not mentioned very often by women the Gospel Contemplations do seem to give rise to dialogues with Jesus or the Father about what has taken place in the contemplation.

In this sense the colloquy seems to have been extremely significant for many of the women in extending and consolidating the imaginal and dialogical experience of the Gospel Contemplation. A woman who made the Exercises in her late forties when asked about how she experienced the colloquy said,

I loved it-it wasn't strange at all. Well it was strange when I first began. I think it came about because of my relationship with Mary. It then became a sense of 'what are we talking about-could you just tell God about that, sort of thing, just put in a word. I found it very very helpful and I still use it now-but again it is because of the relationship I developed with Mary. I enjoy speaking with her (Int. 15).

Some said they found writing their colloquies or dialogues to have been especially helpful. It is interesting given that this not an approach suggested by Ignatius in the original text of the Exercises. One woman said: "I feel comfortable in Ignatian prayer and so used all the forms of prayer but imaginative prayer is my favorite as that is where I feel that I meet God best but I'm not always able to pray that way. The colloquy-I liked praying using the different colour inks"<sup>84</sup> (Int. 4). Her director had encouraged her to write her colloquies using a different colour ink for her words and for Jesus's response.

## **5.10 SHIFTS IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS**

Of those women whom I asked about the impact of making the Exercises on relationships with others<sup>85</sup> most of the women commented that there had been a

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<sup>84</sup> Ignatius however on his sickbed in Loyola did spend time writing out passages using different coloured inks for Jesus and Our Lady.

<sup>85</sup> This only occurred to me sometime into the interviews as an issue which might be important to ask the women about. Therefore unfortunately I do not have data from all the women interviewed in relation to this issue.

positive impact in their relationships with others. Two women interviewed within the first two months of their starting the Exercises noted shifts in the way they related to others as very noticeable and as connected with feeling better in themselves and perhaps less stressed.

So much has changed for me since I started to make the Exercises. I'm listening to people at a deeper level. There is sense of feeling more reflective, more at peace. My relationship with my husband has definitely deepened. The biggest thing for me is that for a long time I have felt critical and judgmental of younger teachers feeling they don't always put in the work to prepare their classes. The Exercises are helping me to be less critical and intolerant. To have more humility I guess (D. Int. 2a).<sup>86</sup>

Another woman also interviewed during the early stages of the retreat says something similar;

I feel like I am carrying God with me throughout the day. There is a sense of enjoyment and expectation. My relationship with God is changing the way I think about things and do things, I am aware of a growing intimacy with my youngest daughter. I think I find myself more sympathetic towards people-more patient. An example I don't get so irritated by beggars (D. Int. 1a).

One woman for whom a sense of interconnectedness was pivotal in her experience of the Exercises was emphatic in her conviction that the Exercises had had a significant impact on her way of relating to others,

I recognize so much more strongly that every person has God within. I always go back to that. We all see things so differently. We misunderstand each other so often. In relationships that understanding means that things don't have the power to hurt me as much as they did in the past. I feel more compassionate with myself when I do inadvertently hurt people. Life is all about relationships and I feel it has given me a basis to look at relationships-they are not always as we would like them to be-but to accept that in a sense. It opens me up for growth in every aspect of my life and brought about a deeper awareness of human relationships (Int. 9).

A woman in her forties with teenage children felt the experience of making the Exercises had spilled over into her family life in a positive way,

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<sup>86</sup> This is the first interview with interviewee two of the women interviewed while engaged in the process of making the Exercises i.e. (Developmental Interview 2a).

I feel the Exercises deepened my relationship with my husband. We have become much closer. In an indirect way I think the Exercises had a profound effect on the whole family-I felt we were all specially held in that time even though I didn't talk about it much (Int. 4).

She also commented that during the retreat she lost interest in sex but that this was not a problem as her husband did not seem to notice. "Only when the retreat was over and my interest returned did I think it was because of the retreat space. In fact that was when he did notice as things are better than ever before!" (Int. 4 by e-mail).

However this was not always the case with regard to their relationship with their husbands who sometimes seemed threatened by the growing intimacy the woman was discovering in her relationship with Jesus or by her growing sense of autonomy. One woman said that the Exercises experience had impacted on her relationship with her husband in way that was not comfortable. She described her sense that her husband felt threatened by her experience of God which became very different to his 'very fundamentalist' approach. Another said her husband had a problem with her talking to her (male) director and not knowing what was being discussed. She said she realized,

I had to make a choice and it was quite a scary choice of choosing to go on with this and that it was possible the repercussions could be very bad in our marriage or sort of just backing off which was something I had done before and I made the decision to stay with it (Int. 1).

Another woman of a similar age had always had a very difficult relationship with her husband but that the experience of making the Exercises had helped her to put a bit of distance between her and her husband which had been helpful for her. "It's as if that relationship with Jesus coated me with something that was kind of protective and so it just makes it different...more manageable" (Int. 11).

Two of the women described no longer feeling like they fitted easily in their church context (Int. 11 and 12). "What it has done is that for me that relationship with God and Jesus has become the most important thing and it has made other things seem not so important. Part of me still wars with this-like with the church. For me it is so clinical, I find it hard to be within the context of going to church, listening to things that just really seem so trivial and have nothing to me to do with that really deep

relationship with God” (Int.11.) The other said that there are times when she thinks that in some ways it might have been easier to just have remained where she was. “I would not have wanted to but it certainly was simpler. But you can’t go back once you have had the experience” (Int. 12).

## **5.11 THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR**

The interviews with the retreatants suggest that the director plays a significant but secondary role. When comparing the experience of the retreatants who were directed by men (five were directed by Jesuits) and those who were directed by women there was no noticeable difference except in the case of one retreatant who was directed by a Jesuit and whose experience of direction was in contrast with the other women interviewed. This retreatant described the role of the director as not making much difference to her experience. She did not experience this negatively but her description is in contrast with that of the other women interviewed for whom the director played a more significant role in the process. In response to the question ‘Can you tell me a little about the experience of direction?’ she said,

Well that was fine because it very much depended on me. I was given the material-we had to keep notes which unfortunately I don’t have anymore but I was amazed at how little the priest spoke. He asked very few questions. It was never more than half an hour. Being directed didn’t seem to...how can I put it...the director didn’t seem to make much difference. He would ask a few questions, give me another reading, points to think about and I would go away. Perhaps in retrospect the questions were a bit more searching than I realized but there was very little input. It was from the head first. I had a man directing me. There was no touchy feely stuff (Int. 13).

This approach to direction is perhaps truer to the stay out of the way and let the Creator deal with the Creature approach which is the approach Ignatius advocates in his Annotation 15.<sup>87</sup> However it is interesting that only this retreatant felt that there

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<sup>87</sup> “The director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creator to deal directly with the Creature, and the Creature directly with his Creator and Lord” (Sp. Exx. 15). (Puhl translation. Chicago. Loyola University Press.)

had not been any noticeable shift in her image of self. When asked if she was aware of having changed in any way in the process she said.

No not really. I still have to keep working on that because I don't have a very good image of myself. So even now so often I will read something- God loves me just as I am-because it still brings me up short sometimes. God loves me just as I am and not "I'm not good enough" or "I would like to be like her" so self-acceptance I think I still have to work on.

This raises interesting questions regarding the approach to direction. Perhaps this approach is helpful only when the retreatant already has a positive image of God and self.

Many other women interviewed commented explicitly on the importance of the director supporting and sustaining the unfolding shifts in image of God and image of self. One woman commented:

I think what she did was to help me to hold onto the shift that was happening and affirm what God was showing me-like often when I reverted back to my old harsh image of God she would remind me of one of my important prayer experiences-like the one with the picture of the rose. I think that it was very important, that I wouldn't have sustained the shift if she hadn't helped me in that way (Int. 6).

This comment suggests that in this woman's experience the director allied herself with the emerging image of God and acted as the memory for the woman of the significant shifts at moments when she found the nascent image difficult to hold onto. In a similar vein another woman spoke of her director sending her "back to a lost growth" (Int. 14).

The importance of this function of affirming and validating the retreatant's experience was very important for another woman from a non-denominational, charismatic church.

I think the director's encouragement is essential-in the times when you think what is happening is a bit weird. You know I knew in my heart that what I was experiencing was right-but I guess being in a church context (which I have now left) where this way of praying and experiencing God is very different-contrary to the way they think- and the knowledge that I

couldn't share what was happening with me with any of them. I needed my director to affirm what God was doing in me (Int. 7).

One young woman whose images of God were that of the powerless, suffering Creator and the Jesus of the passion, seemed to sense that it was important for her to have a director who had a different and positive image of God. She said early on in the interview when asked about her expectations of the process that she remembered clearly telling people why she had chosen her director.

It was because he had such a good image of God-so much an image of a God of love and that really drew me and I can see now that that was very important for what happened to me in the process of making the Exercises (Int. 2).

The women speak about importance of a trusting relationship with the director in which they feel safe to explore and to share at depth. For some, the trust in the director is the reason they move into the process of the Exercises. "I had been in direction for sometime and then my director suggested it (making the Exercises) and I had built up a good trusting relationship with him so when he suggested it I agreed but I didn't really know what to expect"(Int. 1). Another woman put it in these words,

I think the director is vital to the process and so the relationship needed to be one of trust. I had a good relationship with my director before the Exercises and so from the beginning could open up to her. If I had been less sure of her I might not have told her everything. It was very important for me to feel that she did not judge me. The impact of that trust was that I felt held and guided and could put all my energy into the process (Int. 4).

Another woman said that she appreciated the way in which her director shared the reasoning for her decisions with her.

For example she would say "I think the movement of the retreat is this" and at the point where I was to have prayed the Sin of the World she suggested that I move straight into the Second Week as that seemed to be the movement of the Spirit as it was where my deep desire was but she gave me the choice. As it happened it was the right decision and God brought the Sin of the World into the Third Week.

Here the approach of the director, which was valued by the directee, goes against the usual pattern in which the directee would simply be given material and not consulted

regarding the process. The director guides the directee through the dynamic of the Exercises sensing when the graces of a particular 'Week' have been received and at that point moving the directee into the material of the subsequent 'Week'. Here it seems the director moved the directee into the Second Week before the First Week material had been prayed. This may indicate either poor direction or understanding of the dynamic of the Exercises or a critical and helpful sensitivity on the part of the director to the sequencing of desire in this particular retreatant.<sup>88</sup>

One woman in her early fifties expressed strongly the fact that her director was opposite to her in many ways was significant and helpful. She was of a different cultural background, age, religious denomination and nationality. She was a religious whereas the woman was a wife and mother. She explained that it was not so much the dialogue with the director which was significant 'so much as her presence' (Int. 15).

Her presence in the way that I trusted that I could say anything, that I would be accepted, that I wouldn't be judged or thought to be stupid. An absolute acceptance. It was the beginning of showing me that I would be accepted for who I am. I don't have to be anybody different. I don't have to bluff. My life doesn't have to be a lie. I can be me and me is actually ok-whereas me wasn't ok outside of myself-in my eyes (Int. 15).

For her the realization of her director's acceptance of her enabled a realization that God also accepted her-'because at the time I was beginning to discover that God is in everything and creating everything' (Int.15).

## 5.12 ELECTION

This aspect of the election<sup>89</sup> was not one which I initially set out to look at. However it emerged very frequently as integrally related to the shift in image of God and self. The women, apart from one (Int. 9) who made the decision to make a life commitment to the Christian Life Communities and another (Int. 3) who made a commitment to

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<sup>88</sup> This will be discussed later during the analysis of the data with reference to the literature on possible gender differences in the sequencing of desires eg. Janet Ruffing's work. *Spiritual Direction beyond the beginnings*. New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press. 2000.)

<sup>89</sup> The Election is the decision made by the retreatant in the Second Week. Classically there are elections which concern choice of a state of life or which concern reform of life within an already chosen state of life.

single celibate life did not talk about ‘election’ in the sense of making decisions about a state of life or about a call to mission. The dominant strand is that of a deepening intimate relationship with God whose love is not contingent on their ‘doing.’

Interestingly the two women whose images of God shifted from masculine to feminine images spoke in terms of discovering a “personal vocation”<sup>90</sup> which emphasized “being”. The first woman has been previously discussed in relation to the shift in her image of God to a Mother Creator and whose image of Jesus also became that of a woman. She came into the Exercises process with the expectation of making an election. She was at the point at which her children were about to leave home and she hoped to discover through the Exercises what God was inviting her to do next. “I went into the Exercises hoping God would give me a clear sense of some mission-what he wanted me to do when the children left home. I didn’t get that” (Int. 4).

This woman describes several key prayer experiences which enabled something in her which she had not anticipated. The first was in the praying of the Call of Samuel towards the beginning of the Exercises. She describes finding her self as the one saying “Speak Lord your servant is listening.” The response that came was just two words “Pray Woman.” She said that reflecting on the prayer after the process of the Exercises it seemed to her to point to what unfolded later: “the call to pray and be a woman-to be the self God created me to be” (Int. 4).

The pivotal meditation for her was the *Two Standards Meditation* at the beginning of the Second Week which she described in an e-mail and later discussed in a follow-up interview.

I came to the field from the hill above and so had a birds-eye view. From there Satan’s army looked orderly and efficient, it was formed in lines. But Christ’s army seemed disorganized and not army-like. It was shaped like an amoeba under a microscope, moving in and out and the soldiers were all moving about in what seemed a random way. In the centre of the field were many people, sitting on a line drawn down the middle of the

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<sup>90</sup> The term “The Personal Vocation” comes from the book of the same name by the Jesuit, formerly head of the Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality, Herbert Alphonso. *The personal vocation. Transformation in depth through the Spiritual Exercises*. (Rome: Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis 1993). It talks about discovering one’s deepest purpose and distinctive way of being in relation to Christ through the Spiritual Exercises.

field. When I got to the field I turned to Christ's army and Jesus was waiting for me on the border. Stepping in to Christ's army was not automatic before I could go in I had to stop and then make an active decision to take that step over the line. Once inside I walked with Jesus and was amazed at all the people all busy doing different things, all races, from all times in history. At last we came to the centre of the army and there was a glowing light also amoeba shaped and I just knew that God was there and with Jesus I went into the centre and became one with God and as that happened I felt the army/amoeba move outwards and I knew that we had gained ground in the battle. This prayer was a turning point and most subsequent prayers carried the same theme of going into the centre of God. This is where I found my personal vocation and this prayer continues to sustain me (Int. 4 by e-mail).

When I interviewed her almost two years later she said that it had only been in recent months that the significance of this prayer and its implications for her life had become clear for her. When she was united with God at the centre of the army the Kingdom gained ground: "the intimacy and union were critical." In the final prayer the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love she imagined herself in her parish church surrounded by all the people who had influenced her in her life. God as Mother came down from the altar to her. "She took layers of clothes off me and it was a sense of 'Be who I have created you to be.'" This emphasis on "being" is significant in the light of the unfreedom of her experience of feeling the need to please God and significant others by doing.

In describing the significance of this experience for her life she said:

Coming out of the Exercises I have been led on a completely different path. I have always believed I had to *do* things for God. The justification for life was what I did and also always as a little girl it's been how I relate to people and how they related to me. I was constantly encouraged to go out there and be available for others. The criterion of asking myself in each situation 'Am I centered in God?' which I had been asking after the Exercises but before I came to this new clarity (that it is about letting go and letting God) still makes it something I have to do. Whereas this situation is different. I am not caught into wondering will I make this person happy or this other person unhappy. There is an inner sense of surrender. God has it all in control. I consciously try each day to become less responsible for everyone else's feelings. It is not a not-caring or an indifference but it is a letting it go in God (Int. 4).

The second woman whose image of God shifted from a masculine image to a feminine one also said that this impacted significantly on her sense of vocation. After describing the shift to a feminine image of God she said:

My sense of vocation changed. It changed because when I thought of God in masculine terms I thought of my call to be a priest (in the Anglican church) as *doing* a series of things. As I lived more and more with the Sophia image I began to see my vocation as a priest as about **BEING** (her emphasis) and not doing. My sense of self also changed. This new image of God gave me a way to pray that was being-centered and not doing-centered (Int. 5).

Significantly however, although the women emphasized ‘intimacy’ and ‘being’ as most significant, they were and continue to be highly involved in church and community. There is the sense of an inner shift that enables their ‘doing’ to flow out of their inner life and relationship with God. They do not become inward looking. This same young woman said: “I didn’t need to do good things for people anymore but to be more focused on God and my relationship with Him, letting love and care for people flow from this” (Int. 5). There are two exceptions who are not highly involved in ministry anymore. The first got very ill shortly after finishing the Exercises and is bed-ridden and in considerable pain. She had founded and run a large church and prayer ministry for twenty years and constantly felt the need to do more and more for God. In the Exercises she says she discovered:

A new way forward which has thrilled and excited me and whereas before I worked striving to please him and to make myself acceptable to him, I now feel accepted in the Beloved. I have a deep inner knowledge of his love (Int. 7).

This healing of her need to make herself acceptable to God through striving to accomplish bigger and better things for him happened at a crucial time when having contracted a terminal illness she could no longer continue in the ministries in which she had played the leading role.

The other exception to these women being involved in mission post-Exercises is a woman who directly after the Exercises had to move to Japan unexpectedly as her husband got a work contract there. Not being able to speak the language or understand

the culture meant that opportunities for mission were at that stage extremely limited. She felt that her experience of the Exercises prepared her for that reality.

In the chapter on the psychological interpretation of the results we will look more closely at why and how intimacy with Christ in the experience of the Exercises may lead to a greater sense of autonomy for women. We will also look at how the psychological development of women may account for a different 'election' dynamic in which 'being' may act as a powerful corrective to the doing that is often related to the unfreedom inherent in seeking external approval, making reparation, and the denial or suppression of deep authentic desires.

### **5.13 CASE STUDIES**

The significance of the shifts which take place for the woman making the Exercises are most vividly seen in tracking and exploring the experience of individual women. I have chosen two young women, one a black woman in her early thirties (Int. 3) and the other a white woman aged 28 at the time of making the Exercises (D. Int. 4). Nthabiseng<sup>91</sup> was interviewed on several occasions post her experience of having made the Exercises. Lisa was interviewed following two years of preparation for the Exercises which involved spiritual direction and Ignatian prayer, and then later three months into the process of making the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat.

#### **5.13.1 Nthabiseng**

Nthabiseng came into the Exercises grappling with what it means to be a black woman in a patriarchal culture. She wanted to discover who God was for her and to pray about the issue of marriage. Culturally there was a very strong expectation that she should get married and she had reached her mid-thirties and experiencing pressure from her family and community to get married and have children. She speaks of coming into the Exercises as "a good hello to being adult" almost as a kind of process of initiation into adult life. At the time when Nthabiseng came into the Exercises she

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<sup>91</sup> Not their real names

described herself as having a very strong desire for God. “I was at a time in my life when I was truly truly searching for God.” She was also very depressed having experienced the deaths of two people she had been very close to. She had always prayed spontaneously. Colloquy was already a part of her way of engaging. She had left university and was struggling to find employment. She baked cakes and went out on the streets to sell them. She said,

And I went out and I would pray each time I was selling and I would speak to Mary and we would talk-you know have a conversation of prayer and we would also have a conversation of prayer with Jesus and I also had a conversation with my grandmother who had died. She was I would say an ancestor and I would say Grandma you cannot leave me to struggle...let me have money and let me be successful in this business. It is a small one but it can be grown one day.

#### *5.13.1.1 Shifts in image of God and self*

Nthabiseng’s pre-Exercises image of God is mixed. One strand is of a punitive God from whom one could expect retribution. “If I turn left and I had to turn right well God was watching me and God can kick.” This image seems to have come out of her experience of catechesis “the ten commandments as a child when explained they were quite powerful and threatening” and the sense she was given that if you did something wrong “God was watching me and God can kick” (Int. 3).

However concurrent with the negative images of a punitive God there was also a significant and positive sense of Jesus, Mary and the saints as people to whom you could confide everyday concerns and troubles. This seems to be linked with her experience of her grandmother, a significant figure in her early life, who had died and who as an ancestor was someone who she could appeal to for help. Her relationship with her grandmother seems to have contributed a caring, protective aspect to her God-representation. Both her relationship with her grandmother and representations of her grandmother, seem to unconsciously make available to her a more positive image of God.

Somebody else won't understand me but I wanted the God of freedom, the God of love. The God of touching -the God who understands where I am with the self, and my own communication with the ancestors.

She describes the shift that begins to take place in her image of God as being about being seen by God. In her experience we see that the way she experiences God as seeing her shifts how she sees and experiences herself. She described discovering her own beauty and specialness. She said that in the Exercises she found "that God is saying I am beautiful and that's what I never knew, that in God's eyes I am beautiful- so I was searching for that beauty, you know just to be told that you are beautiful and you are loved and you are special to God" (Int. 3). As she began to see herself as looked at in love by God she sees his eyes mirroring to her a sense of trust and confidence in herself. Her way of seeing and experiencing herself is transformed in the relationality of the experience of being seen and trusted. God acts as a "private audience" whose regard transforms her image of herself.

When I was praying the Principle and Foundation I wanted to gain trust in myself and in God that God loves me and that he does trust me in the whole situation and what I saw was his eyes that were trusting in me and so it was gaining trust. There was confidence. The prayer gave me confidence in myself-the things that I was lacking. Trust and confidence and the love of God and it is a relaxing prayer for me....I was not confident in myself and the eyes of God came directly looking at me and from there I started feeling confident that God is looking at me. And when it first happened he was in tears in what I was praying and I didn't like to see the Lord in tears for me and he is telling me how he is feeling about me. From there changing my attitude from hopeless moving into looking into his eyes also I gained confidence in that and said 'God is really looking at everyone.

For her the Principle and Foundation opens for her the image of God as a Father who cares for all his children and his creation.

This is what the Principle and Foundation did for me. I didn't really struggle with colour or race but the situation in the country was more of colour and race. I grew up not knowing about race-not knowing what is white, Indian or black. I knew that we are all people of God. But at school what I would hear about was about colour but I never stayed with that in my heart. But in praying the Principle and Foundation God was so clear with me-more like a good foundation from home that he is not into race or into women or men but I am looking at all my children...It (*The Principle and Foundation*) has it all for me especially in our situation in South

Africa when you look at poverty or riches I learned something from those words Ignatius wrote. You know we sort of grew up knowing that the most people who are faced with poverty and illness are African and the white people are getting all and just to pray and to find that God is not like that. God is for all of us, so for me I really got deeper in.

The healing experience that God loves all his children irrespective of gender or race is experienced as a powerful affirmation of self. As a black woman who grew up in the worst years of Apartheid in South Africa and who would have experienced racism, prejudice and economic disadvantage, she discovers a loving Father who treats everyone with equality as his children. Her experience in the Exercises affirmed what she had always fundamentally believed; that God loves each person equally irrespective of race.

She also experienced a shift in her image of God as father in her praying of the Our Father. The image shifted from a sense of the power (and an implied distance) of God to a sense of God as intimately involved with her most basic needs and concerns.

You know Our Father for me was such a powerful prayer, powerful because just to say hallowed be thy name...to realise that God is powerful, just to be able to greet him. But when I was doing the Exercises it became very different in such a way that I started moving slowly with it. The hallowed be thy name if I stop there I would stop and listen to what God is saying to me. If for instance one grew up in a family worried about whether there will be enough food for tomorrow, collecting food sort of it taught me that food is not prepared by me but is prepared by God...It was looking at him, listening, being there for him and him also touching me and just playing with that joy of being touched by God. Just knowing that he is the one preparing the food (Int. 3).

#### ***5.13.1.2 Freedom from oppressive aspects of culture***

Her experience of being a woman in her culture is a painful one for her. "Being a woman in the African culture is not much joy." She explains that girls are not seen as important because they will not carry on the family name. They are only important insofar as they bear sons. She resists the sense that this is the way things are and one must simply accept. Despite having questioned the patriarchy of her own experience for many years, she grapples with different inner voices. There is the voice which

asserts her own dignity and equality as a woman and other internalized voices from her cultural experience of exclusion and of being regarded as inferior to men.

Challenges are that you always have to be respectful as a woman, in your family, with your in-laws. Your husband can do anything and you have to bow down and respect him. And that was not my heart, my heart was not agreeing to that. I saw that we all do the same things, we eat and go to the toilet and drink water and I would think what makes them different, what makes them higher than me? And that has been a struggle my whole life and even now.

The inner voice that believes she is equal to men is affirmed and strengthened as she engages and tries on the voices of some of the women in the Gospel and connects with their interaction with Jesus.

The self grew very much. Grew in such a way that is it was strengthening what I was feeling. It was saying look at Christ with Mary Magdalene and look at Christ and Martha and Mary, the friendship they have. You know I would look at Christ with the women he communicated with and I also associated myself with some of these women and really this strengthened me.

Her family, and her mother in particular, did not understand her desire for solitude even as a young child, thinking it meant she was upset or angry. Culturally it was considered strange to want to spend so much time in solitude. In her experience of Gospel Contemplation she found validation and affirmation of that need in herself in Jesus's taking time away from his disciples to go and pray. Her experience of the Exercises strengthened her capacity to resist what she experienced as oppressive aspects of her African culture.

#### ***5.13.1.3 The Election and Imaginative Contemplation***

When Ntabiseng entered the Exercises she was praying for a husband and family. As she entered into the infancy narratives this aspect became focal. However she was surprised and distressed to discover that when she entered into praying the nativity she could not imagine herself married with a baby. Her own longed-for story of being a wife and mother was one that she found herself unable to imagine in the prayer.

When I started the Exercises I was praying for a family. I was saying this is my chance to pray and getting into the Second Week I also prayed for a family. In my imagination I wanted to put a father and children-to see those things. But it was clear there was not such a thing. There was no father and there were no children and I was disappointed and I had to pray again. I thought maybe I didn't pray so well the first time and it happened for many times that I prayed but could not see a father and children in the prayer. I shared with my director and he also said he did not see a family in my situation. I prayed focusing on Mary and I saw her saying yes to the angel Gabriel and I was a bit jealous about that whole situation that Mary already she is pregnant and I am not going to be pregnant. And she moved in a few days to go and see Elizabeth and Elizabeth was pregnant and again there was that kind of jealousy and asking what is God doing to me? They both gave birth and when they gave birth I could not look at Jesus the child, I looked at Jesus as the preacher. I also could not accept the wise men and the shepherds coming to give him or to give Mary the gifts. It was because I felt angry that I was not going to have a family.

Her experience in the imaginative contemplation in which it seemed to her God was showing her that marriage and a family was not his desire for her led her into a difficult time of searching to find her vocation. This struggle was also one of grappling with the surrender of her own desire to marry as well as not meeting the strong cultural expectations that a woman's worth is largely contingent upon her marrying and producing children.

And so I had to go and pray and redefine the whole situation and also learning that a person can be single which is something which is not in my culture. What I knew was that you either become a priest or a nun or you get married and have children. Those are the only things I knew. But also I had to go and redefine what it meant for me not to get married. It was very difficult for me to accept those things and it was very difficult to look at Jesus as a child being given these gifts. Redefining took a long time. It took me a long time to begin to know that you can be single and even make a vow to live as a celibate single person. But it took time. And the Second Week took the longest time. Eventually I could hold the child Jesus after I had come through my own struggle. And also it made me to go back to my own history of initiation and to redefine my own culture.

Nthabiseng spoke of the imaginative contemplation on the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth as key in helping her to let go of the inner self that wanted to be married and to discover a different part of herself that wanted to be single and in a vowed, celibate relationship with God, something foreign to her culture and family background. Interestingly it is the relationship with two pregnant women, one very young, the

other much older, which helped her. She connected with the way in which they struggled in their own communities and they became two women with whom she could discuss her own situation.

One of the contemplations which was good for me as a woman was looking at Mary and at Elizabeth and I was the third person in that. And Mary was very young and I was thinking about if you are at that age and an angel comes to tell you you are pregnant and I thought of myself at fifteen and it was just like impossible. I was so young-still a child I have to go back and ask my parents is this right but I learnt to discern with God and not with my community and it was also difficult because I used to discern with my own community but I had to learn to discern with my God. I learnt to say who is God for me-I grew up with the idea of who God is for the community and I am not against that, but in that understanding it is more an elderly person is the one leading and holding God. If you are young you cannot say in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and lead a prayer but making the Exercises made me aware that I could also do that, he is also God for you, you can also lead a prayer...and so looking at Elizabeth we know she was very old and I always think maybe she was in her eighties or nineties and then she fell pregnant. You know I come from a community where on every corner people are standing and gossiping or just talking and I said Oh God how much did? They gossip about Elizabeth and about Mary. And here I stand and they might also gossip about me and say she is 34 or 35 and she is not married and does not have children. But God was saying to me “Be strong these are the two people I have given you to be examples for your life” and my envy was removed and I started loving Mary and Elizabeth more and more. They also helped me to discern to discern my vocation. I have made this discernment through God.

Nthabiseng’s upbringing had taught her that she as a woman and a younger person was not allowed to make the important decisions about her life. She was taught that the older people in the community had access to God but that she as a young unmarried woman did not. Though her experience of making the Exercises she came to an awareness that she could engage with God herself and discern his desires for her life. Engaging with and identifying with Mary and Elizabeth was significant in helping her come to freedom to make her election. A younger part of herself could identify with Mary whose call like her own was not one which would be easily understood or accepted by her parents. Another part of herself identified with Elizabeth. The part that knew that in not being married and having children at her age she would be judged negatively by her community. The intensive experience of imaginal dialogue in the Gospel Contemplations enabled previously subjugated inner

voices or 'I-positions' to be strengthened. Her image of God changed to that of a nurturing provider and her image of self shifted to a sense of being beautiful and valuable. Out of that sense of herself as unconditionally loved by God she became free enough to be capable of making a decision which went against the external voices of her family and community.

### **5.13.2 Lisa**

Lisa<sup>92</sup> is in her late twenties and highly educated. At the time of her first interview she was only six weeks into the Exercises process. She had however been in spiritual direction with the same director for the previous two years and had in that period been exposed to Ignatian methods of prayer including imaginative prayer.

#### ***5.13.2.1 Shifts in Image of God***

Prior to beginning her Spiritual Direction Lisa had been struggling with not knowing how to connect with God. "I thought I want to connect with God but I have no idea how to and there was also just a lot of hurt between God and I."

She spoke about a disconnection between what she knew intellectually or conceptually about God and what she experienced and explained this in relation to her family and church background.

They would always say 'your faith shouldn't be based on your feelings' and I guess what they meant was things like-just because you are feeling down doesn't mean that God does not love you but the message I was getting was your feelings aren't important; your feelings don't count. What you are feeling about God and your faith needs to be pushed aside because it is about faith and faith is about knowing. And so I knew God was love but I didn't *feel* God was love.

In the process of spiritual direction in preparation for the Exercises she described her image of God as having shifted. Whereas previously she had not been able to

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<sup>92</sup> Not her real name

experience God as “kind and loving and gentle” which was what she knew of him intellectually this began to shift for her. A key aspect of this shift was the experience of God being able to identify with her as a woman.

When asked to elaborate she said,

I had a dream once in which I was very angry. You know people say Jesus knows and understands everything you have ever been through and I was angry. I thought how can Jesus know-Jesus was never a woman raped for example. And I had this dream where I came into the room and there was a painting of a woman’s body who had been raped and she was hanging on this cross and it was the iconic image of Jesus’s face and it was almost as if he was saying to me ‘I know what it is to be woman raped.’ And that was long before I started on this Ignatian journey-maybe five or six years ago. But it was only during spiritual direction that I felt fully able to embrace that image.

She described this experiencing of God as a woman “very liberating.” It was only when she was given permission to embrace this image which had emerged for her in the dream and later in prayer, that she could allow herself to do so. She had previously felt strongly that to image God as a woman was “not allowed” and also that to experience God as an emotional God was also not legitimate. “I had always been taught that feelings are so bad and had to be suppressed and so I never imagined God was emotional and that has really changed for me over the past two years.”

The internal prohibition against the female image of God was very strong. She said,

I did not tell anybody. I was even a bit ashamed about it even though it was very powerful. I felt people wouldn’t understand. That they would think it was weird.

Part of what helped her in this shift of image of God was affirmation of the new image. Discovering that her director was accepting and affirming of her image of God as woman, and that other women had written of their experience of a similar image enabled her to find different external validation of her experience in contrast to the judgment which she feared from her own religious community. Those external voices of her community were particularly strong and her father’s work as a pastor and

missionary contributed to the strength of those external voices which she had internalized.

Some of the images my director gave me to pray with were of women. And there is a poem she gave me of the Bakerwoman-and I found that I wasn't the only one. There were others who experienced God as a woman.

The inner conflict or dissonance between her instinctive desire to relate to God in ways which included the feminine and the emotional life, and her family upbringing which presented God solely as masculine and intellectual was intense and intolerable to her.

#### *5.13.2.2: Shift in image of self*

Lisa described her sense of self as also having shifted substantially during the process. She spoke initially of a release of anger:

Prior to this process I had a tremendous amount of anger-and I have struggled with anger since I was eleven or twelve. I think most of it was to do with the fact that so much of what I felt and experienced was unexpressed and unaffirmed. I felt like I had a pent-up bomb inside of me. And if I did sometimes express a little of it would be so much disapproved of and looked down on so just having all my feelings and emotions allowed and affirmed-even the angry ones. Being able to feel angry in God's presence. The bitterness and hurt and disappointment could come out. I feel like a different person through this process. It is such a relief.

In the process Lisa was enabled to bring the parts of herself which she had been battling to own because they were banned in her family and church culture into the relationship with God and to integrate them. These were significant aspects of herself-her emotional life and in particular emotions such as anger which were labeled 'bad' and needed to be suppressed could have a space to be accepted and even affirmed in the context of the shifting image of and relationship with God.

She describes herself as having experienced "an integration of parts of myself that I thought had to be suppressed or were bad and needed to be fixed. I can be free to be all those parts." I asked her if she felt her self had expanded. She said,

That's actually a very helpful way of saying it and it is interesting that you say bigger...people around me....say I used to be little-Lisa and now I'm becoming big-Lisa and I can see that I take up more presence in a positive way I used to feel like I had to fight for a voice but more and more I have a voice without having to fight for it.

### ***5.13.2.3 The 'how' of the shift***

Lisa describes a number of factors as significant in relation to the shift she experienced in her image of God and self. She described the methods of prayer she was introduced to including praying with pictures, Imaginative Contemplation and "Lectio as taking it from a head process to a heart process." This was significant for her because,

Before everything had been with my head and yet I am a person who experiences life through my heart so there was this big disconnect happening all the time....whereas before I had always pushed my feelings aside, suddenly my feelings became the very centre of my prayer and that was incredibly relieving for me to be able to pray my feelings and have them validated and affirmed and acknowledged by God.

Also significant was the director's affirmation of what Lisa wanted to bring into her prayer but had been taught was not permissible.

My first thing was always to say 'is it ok'-like I wanted to write in my prayer and I said to my director is it ok and she said 'of course, use what helps you.:-so a lot of it was just affirming the things I was already doing.

Her sense that she could trust her director and that her experience would not be judged was critically important in allowing previously disallowed parts of herself to be owned.

I think I have a lot of fears about what I am going to say-is it allowed-is it not allowed-is it going to be judged or looked down on and just to have it accepted so unconditionally is very significant.

At a later stage in the process of making the Exercises as she was moving into the 1<sup>st</sup> Week process Lisa answered questions by e-mail. When asked what had been important to her in the process up until that point identified a shift in being able to

embrace parts of herself that she had previously found it difficult to accept and integrate.

Amongst other things I became aware of some complex parts of my “inner landscape” which I had rejected and could experience God loving all those complex parts of who I am and allowing me to love those and accept those as integrally part of myself. Integration has been a significant theme for me. Ignatian Spirituality seems, with increasing depth, to invite the integration of every part of the self. No part of myself is rejected or despised or thrown aside or suppressed. Every part is embraced and is seen as a possible means to move towards God.

In expressing the sense of change that she experiences in herself she says;

I’m learning to accept all of me. And it has changed the way I interact with others. I still find it hard. There are so many critical voices, negative voices, voices saying I’m not good enough. These voices make me defensive and afraid and so I behave badly towards others, criticizing them, judging them. But as I begin to believe that God accepts me, and learn to accept myself, I begin also to accept others more.

At the same time what is evident is the beginnings of a significant shift, not only in the way she experiences herself, but also in the way she experiences God. She vacillates still in that process of change between her former image of God and the new image which has grown in the process of spiritual direction and which seems to be intensifying in making the Exercises. When asked if she had noticed any further shifts in her image of God after the previous interview she said:

All the time! I keep being amazed at how little God seems to me in my experience to be that God of judgment, fear, guilt, exclusivity etc that I felt the church has been teaching. Instead, he is just so abundant, so generous, so big, with so much to give. Verses that say, ask for anything, and God wants to give you all that you need are suddenly standing out to me. I still sometimes fear that this is all a dream, and that I will wake up and find that God is that nasty God after all. But every part of me hopes – has faith – that he is all that I ever dreamed he would be. And every now and then I have that deep assurance. I had that thought suddenly come upon me once when cycling in my neighborhood. It was late afternoon and the sun was just setting and everything felt so peaceful and so good and I had this thought out of the blue that filled my whole being: ‘Jesus is all you ever hoped he would be’. (This was last year sometime). As I started the Exercises, in the first few weeks this reminder kept coming back to me, like a gift: Jesus is all you ever dreamed, all you ever imagined, all you ever hoped, with all your being that he would be.

In this description there is the sense of the process by which her image of God may begin to shift and how the shift is tentative at first and needs to be held onto and reaffirmed. Layers of new experiences of God begin to displace former less helpful images.

A pivotal experience for Lisa came at the end of her prayer in the disposition days and Principle and Foundation. At the end of this period of praying the material in daily life she went away to continue praying the material on a retreat weekend away with the guidance of her director. She describes this experience which facilitated a deep shift in the way she experiences herself.

I felt strongly drawn to paint but I didn't know what I wanted to paint. At the time I was ending off the creation part of the Exercises and had been looking at sort of an overview of my life so far, summing up all the many exercises that had allowed me to explore different parts of my creation story. I started to paint themes and ideas that had arisen out of a 'summary poem' I had written. The painting process was hard as there were so many voices telling me that it wasn't good enough, that it looked stupid, that it was so badly painted that I should be ashamed of it. As I write this I can still feel the shame. Later, as I told my director about it, and about how much I hated the painting and how stupid it was, she asked me to bring it to her for her to see. I didn't want to at all, but I did. I placed it before us and sat in such a way that I wouldn't even have to look at it. As she looked at it she had tears in her eyes and said it was so, so beautiful. As she began to explore the painting, describing what she saw, I just began to cry and cry.

She asked that for the rest of the day I sit with the painting and ask it what it wanted, what it needed. I felt silly asking a badly painted piece of work what it needed! But as I sat with that question I sensed it was saying that it needed to be loved, to be embraced, to be accepted. As the day progressed I had a deeper and deeper sense of God loving that painting so much, and the girl I had painted in the painting, and through Him I began to love it/her too. Of course, it was myself I was rejecting and myself I was learning to love and embrace and accept. This was only possible in the context of knowing I was so so deeply loved and embraced and accepted by God. As I write, I experience again the absolute relief of knowing that all that stuff within me is held and loved by Him, and not judged or dismissed or despised by Him. And so nor do I need to judge or dismiss or despise any part of me (or any part of anyone else).

In this account it is particularly evident how the sense of God's acceptance of her enabled a shift in the way in which she was able to see herself. When Lisa saw how

her director was moved by the painting and found it beautiful she is persuaded to allow herself to become open to looking for that beauty in the painting of the girl who represents herself. Her experience in the prayer of being loved, embraced and accepted by God is one in which she becomes able to accept all of herself, even the parts which she had previously judged, dismissed or despised.

### **5.13.3 Observations on the two case studies**

The Exercises are designed to lead a person to a place of the greatest possible freedom. In making the Exercises both young women from very different backgrounds culturally and educationally experienced a sense of liberation from aspects of their culture which did not fit for them. Nthabiseng discovered a sense of dignity as a black person and through praying the Gospel stories experienced herself affirmed as a woman. Beyond that she was able to embrace a vocation, as a celibate woman, which dramatically broke with her cultural norms and expectations. Lisa's experience of the Exercises also strengthened the latent inner voices which went against the norms and expectations of her very different cultural background. As a young Afrikaans woman brought up in a highly intellectual environment and in the Reformed church tradition she had been taught to deny and suppress key aspects of her experience. Her experience of prayer and spiritual direction gave permission for those aspects which included the feminine and the emotional life to have space. For both women their experience of seeing themselves as beautiful and cherished by God enabled them to embrace the aspects of themselves which they had previously not been able to integrate.

## **5.14 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have looked at the themes which emerged from the interviews both with women reflecting back on their experience of the Spiritual Exercises and women currently engaged in the process. All the women except one (Int. 13) described a shift in their image both of God and self. Images of God which were predominantly transcendent or ambivalent prior to the woman making the Exercises shifted, through

a process of engaging in imaginative prayer and through the support of the spiritual director to engaging with Jesus as a person with whom a relationship was possible. Through Imaginative Contemplation and colloquy the sustained engagement in imaginal dialogue seems to have facilitated a shift in relating to God which moved from transcendence to immanence through to intimacy.<sup>93</sup> This tended to culminate in the experience of a close, intimate relationship with Jesus in the prayer of the Third Week. The one woman who felt that there was not a noticeable shift in her image of self, though there was some shift in her image of God seemed to have a very different experience of making the Exercises to the other women interviewed. She described her entry into the Exercises as motivated by ‘interest’ rather than by a felt desire for a closer relationship with God. Her experience of imaginal prayer engaged her on a head and not a heart level and her experience of spiritual direction in the Exercises was significantly less relational than that described by the other women interviewed. It appears that it is the relational and dialogical aspects of the process most notably the relationship with God which develops through imaginative and dialogical prayer supported by the relationship with the director which facilitate shifts in image of God and self in women making the Exercises.

What was also striking was a lessening of the need for defensive mechanisms and the link with the kind of “election” experienced by the women. As the women interviewed experienced themselves as unconditionally loved, the need to compulsively please or perform in order to win or keep love diminished. At the same time through the engagement in imaginative prayer and colloquy the women were able to allow previously dormant or repressed parts of themselves space as other voices which deserve to be heard. Once in touch with their authentic desires as opposed to the “shoulds” and “oughts” of the external voices which they had integrated and which had dominated, they were able to discern their personal vocation. The ‘election’ for almost all the women interviewed was not about a decision regarding a mission or ministry but about being able to be fully themselves.

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<sup>93</sup> Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert articulate this movement from transcendence through immanence to intimacy in their book *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed. Uncovering liberating possibilities for women* (New York. Paulist Press 2001).

In subsequent chapters we will examine the findings from a theological and psychological point of view and then dialogue the two perspectives.

# **CHAPTER SIX - INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

## **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

The thesis aims to examine the impact of the imaginal and dialogical processes of the Spiritual Exercises on image of God and image of self in women making the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat. It also aims to examine the processes by which this impact takes place. In the previous chapter I presented the major findings which emerged from the process of interviewing women about their experience of making the 19th Annotation Retreat. The majority of these women were interviewed after they had completed the process, while a smaller number were interviewed at different points while making the Exercises. A number of aspects emerged as significant. These were the function of desire, shifts in image of God and self, the role of Gospel Contemplation and colloquy, shifts in relationships with significant others, the role of the direction relationship, and the lessening of defensive mechanisms which was highlighted in how “election” processes unfolded for some of the women.

In this chapter my aim is to discuss these findings from a psychological perspective, especially to identify the mechanisms whereby women experience the reported shifts in their image of God and self in the process of making the Spiritual Exercises. The theological/spiritual perspectives will be addressed in chapter seven. In this chapter I will discuss the findings in relation to major psychological approaches which were introduced in chapter three; object-relations theory focusing on the work of Rizzuto, (1979) Winnicott (1953, 1960, 1965, 1971) and Ulanov (2001) and the Dialogical Self theory of Hermans et al ( 1992, 1993a 1993b; 1996; 2001; 2003; 2004). I argue that these theories are helpful to better understand the dialogical and relational processes of the Spiritual Exercises and how these impact on the person’s image of God and self.

## **6.2 SHIFTS IN IMAGE OF GOD AND SELF**

In this section I will argue that the results of the study support Ana-Maria Rizzuto's (1979) conclusions that the God-representation is formed from multiple influences; that it is open to revision throughout life and that its revision is significant for the ongoing process of psychic integration. Rizzuto (1979) does not, however, venture to explore the mechanisms whereby those revisions take place, or whether and how such a process might be facilitated, other than expressing the concern that analysts should not shy away from working with the God-representation. While agreeing with Rizzuto that the God-representation remains open to revision, I suggest that to leave its revision or otherwise only to spontaneous transitions arising from experiences such as life crises is to forego a remarkable opportunity for psychological and spiritual development, and that the Spiritual Exercises seem to provide mechanisms which facilitate the process of revising the God-representation.

With regard to the use of terminology, this becomes complex as different theorists use different language to describe the way in which an individual sees or experiences God. Rizzuto uses the term the "God-representation" to describe the "private, more secret and personal experience each believer has with his or her God" (Rizzuto 1979: 4). This is what Ulanov terms the "subjective-object God" (2001: 22) and what spiritual directors tend to call the person's "image of God". Ulanov (2001) also uses the concept of the "objective-object God" (2001: 26) to describe images from religious traditions, and to differentiate these from the more personal representations of God. In this chapter I will use the terms used by the each theorist when discussing the possible application of their theory to the research. When talking about the individual's total experience of God at a particular point I will simply use the term "image of God".

## **6.3 THE FORMATION OF THE GOD-REPRESENTATION**

For object-relations theorist Donald Winnicott, (1965) the formation of the God-representation is not only an internal psychic process in which internal representations

arise from early interactions with significant others, but also process which is influenced by the child's experience of how God is presented within the family and church contexts. Similarly, Ulanov (2001) following Winnicott proposes that there is a subjective-object God which could be seen as the child's own created experience of God out of his or her constellation of early experiences and object-relations, and the objective-object God who is the God of institutionalized religion. In other words the God-representation is a blend of parental representations and culturally mediated representations of God.

Rizzuto (1979: 44) asserts that the God-representation is formed not only from the paternal imago, (as posited by Freud), but also from the unconscious wished-for and feared parents of the imagination. The internal representation of God may represent both the very worst that one fears in one's parents and the ideal qualities that one longs for in a parent. The early formation of the God-representation is influenced by a whole constellation of factors including the pre-oedipal and oedipal situations, other relational issues and conflicts with parents and siblings and the atmosphere of the home with regard to religion. Moreover, Rizzuto notes that "for a girl, whatever the resolution of her oedipal crisis, her God-representation will always be more complex and multifaceted than the primary object of her preference" (Rizzuto 1979: 45).

Rizzuto's findings regarding the multiple influences which feed into and form the God-representation were borne out in the interviews with women making the Exercises who frequently described the influence of both paternal and maternal imagos. Several of the women described their grandmothers as the most significant influence in the development of their image of God (Int. 3, Int. 11, Int. 15). Early relationships with parents had a significant effect on the God-representation whether positive or negative. Women described similar dynamics of relating to God to those they had learnt through the experience of significant early relationships, most often with their father. For example, one young woman saw God as demanding and his love as conditional on her doing, which was the way she had experienced her relationship with her father (Int. 4) while another saw her need to perform and achieve for God as something she had always had to do in her early relationships (Int.7).

Rizzuto also claims that in forming their image of God people do not only make use of object sources such as parents “but also utilize, though in a secondary way, teachings received from their religious institutions, and teachers which either confirm, attempt to correct, or collide with their personal representations of God” (Rizzuto 1979: 10). Freud however maintained that religious education does not significantly influence the person’s image of God as their God-representation is essentially formed prior to the influence of religious education. From the experience of the women interviewed it would seem that they believe that their religious education has a more profound influence on the formation of their God-image than Freud would have allowed, particularly when this influence was positive. Clearly it is difficult for women looking back on their very early experience to accurately evaluate the relative contribution of their early religious education. However it recurs again and again in the interviews as significant, either negatively or positively. Therefore I would suggest (argue) that the evidence of the study concurs with Rizzuto’s (1979) view that people also utilize and integrate early teaching in the formation of their image of God.

As this study is focused on whether and how God-representations shift through the process of the Spiritual Exercises, the interviews focused more intensively on this period, rather than on the process of formation of the God-representation. Therefore, while we have information derived from the interviews, which has allowed us to reflect to some extent on this process, it is insufficient to confidently describe the relationship between internal and external factors in the early formation of the person’s image of God.

#### **6.4 THE REVISION OF THE GOD-REPRESENTATION**

Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) maintains that the God-representation remains open to revision throughout the life process. Following Winnicott (1965) she maintains that “the psychic process of creating and finding God - this personalized representational transitional object - never ceases in the course of human life. It is a developmental process that covers the entire life cycle from birth to death” (Rizzuto 1979: 179). Freud had posited the view that after the resolution of the Oedipal Complex, the God imago, like other inner representations making up the person’s inner world, would

essentially be fixed and open to revision only through psychoanalysis (Rizzuto 1979: 45). Rizzuto (1979) however, conceives of the God-representation as being more open to change than did Freud. She suggests that puberty and late adolescence are significant moments in the life cycle when the God-representation may undergo revision, but that throughout life significant experiences may provide the impetus for the person to reexamine and revise his or her God-representation (Rizzuto 1979: 200).

Each epigenetic phenomenon offers a new opportunity to revise the representation or leave it unchanged. Each new crisis or landmark-illness, death, promotions, falling in love, birth of children, catastrophes, wars and so on-provides similar opportunities. Finally the simple events of everyday life may bring back to memory some once highly relevant or feared aspect of the God-representation. A scent, a tune, a look, a gift, a word, a threat may awaken the forgotten God-representation. Narratives of religious revivals provide plentiful examples of the instrumentality of a trivial event in bringing about intense feelings for a suddenly manifest God (Rizzuto 1979: 200).

All the women in the study described marked changes in their God-representations lending support to Rizzuto's claim the God-representation can shift significantly after its formation. Pre-Exercises images of God tended to be distant and ambivalent, whereas post-Exercises images of God for all the women interviewed were both positive and relational. The shift in image of God seems strongly related to a new or deepened capacity for intimacy with God or it may be that new intimacy with God changed the way God is experienced by the women. Most marked was a shift from a distant experience of God, described by one woman as "a transcendent God" (Int. 1) to a God they had come to experience in strongly relational terms, for example "Beloved and Friend" (Int. 7); "tender parent" (Int. 2).

There was often a gap between what the woman believed intellectually or conceptually about God, and her own experience of God which was most noticeable when there was a conceptually positive image of God coupled with an experientially negative or distant image of God. There was a desire for a relationship rather than simply an intellectual awareness of God. This desire was connected to a sense that a positive, affirming experience of God was possible for them, but had not yet been discovered. This desire, along with the belief that its realization was possible, provided the inner impetus for their decision to enter into the process of the Spiritual

Exercises. This is very much in line with object-relations theory's emphasis on the primacy of the drive towards relationship.

None of the women interviewed were in puberty and only one was in early adulthood. The majority were in their forties and fifties at the time of making the Exercises which suggests that even when the God-representation has been held for many years it remains open to change. Interestingly many of the women had been seeking a different experience of God for a number of years, some actively through engagement in various programs for spiritual development. They do not report significant shifts in their image of God prior to their engagement in Ignatian prayer and spiritual direction. This may be because temperamentally they were more suited to a kataphatic tradition such as Ignatian Spirituality than an apophatic one such as in Centering prayer. However, I would argue that Ignatian prayer requires an active engagement with the God-representation as the woman in imagination dialogues with her God-representation and with material (predominantly from the Scriptures) which may elaborate, challenge or modify that existing God-representation. In a form of prayer such as Centering prayer (for which there is undoubtedly an important place in spiritual growth) there is a being with God but not perhaps an active engagement with the God-representation which would facilitate its development and modification.

One woman interviewed reported the experience of another woman whom she had recently taken into spiritual direction. She had invited her to engage in imaginative contemplation. Having tried it the woman, who had previously been using centering prayer, said that this prayer was different and more difficult "because you actually have to actively engage with God" (Int. 15). Gospel Contemplation demands an active engagement with one's God-representation which may make it particularly potent as a means of revising the God-representation. In order for the relationship with God to be a living, growing relationship, the God-representation cannot be left packed away like an old suitcase but must be actively engaged with from the perspective of the current life experience of the directee.

### **6.5.1 Shifts in image of self**

Rizzuto maintains that the child and the adult's sense of self is affected by the representational traits of the individual's private God.

Consciously, preconsciously, or unconsciously, God, our own creation, like a piece of art, a painting, a melody, or the imaginary woman of Louis Couperous, will, in reflecting what we have done, affect our sense of ourselves (Rizzuto 1979: 179).

Critically she maintains that once our initial God-representation has been formed, "it remains a potentially available representation for the continuous process of psychic integration" (Rizzuto 1979: 180). In other words if the God-representation changes, this will impact on all the other inner representations or internalized objects.

The women interviewed described changes both in their God-representation and in their image of themselves. For the two youngest women one of the strongest shifts was connected with coming to see themselves as beautiful. As young women the issue of physical beauty may be more strongly linked to image of self than for the older women, but the notion of beauty seems connected to a sense of being valued and cherished. In engaging in imaginal dialogue they experience and internalise a new gaze on themselves as women and a new voice which reflects them as beautiful. This reflection comes to be integrated into their changing self-image.

### **6.5.2 A lessening of defensive mechanisms**

For many of the women interviewed there was a lessening of defensive processes. This God which the woman both creates and encounters, is able to meet the woman's unmet emotional needs and therefore enables her to let go of previously entrenched defensive mechanisms for operating in the world

The women most often described themselves prior to making the Exercises as living predominantly from the voiced positions of pleaser, the one who tries to do whatever will make the other happy; performer or achiever; or a chameleon who adapted her way of being to meet the needs of whoever she was with. The inner voices which

insisted that the woman please or perform in order to have value as a person diminished in volume as the women entered imaginal encounters in which they experienced their acceptability as not contingent upon those conditional aspects of themselves. For example for the women whose dominant images of God shifted from masculine to feminine, (Int. 4; Int. 5), the “pleaser” and “achiever” voices respectively receded and a new “being” voice was able to emerge.

The women described the growing relationship with Jesus and their sense of being accepted by him as creating a new sense of self-acceptance. It may be that the experience of sustained, daily engagement in imaginative contemplation allows a new significant relationship to develop in which a different voice is heard and eventually becomes dominant, subjugating the old voice/s of conditional acceptance and love. The dynamics of engaging in relationships in which acceptance and love are, either in reality or in perception, contingent on certain ways of acting or being, is usually learnt from an early age. This is the development of what Winnicott calls “the false self whose defensive function is to hide and protect the true self” (Winnicott 1965: 142). During the Exercises the women report experiencing a different relationship in which love and acceptance are not contingent on what they do. They come to experience themselves as intrinsically valuable. Pennington (2000) describes his understanding of a shift from the false self to a discovery of the true self in a way that presents very accurately the experience of most of the women interviewed. “Children’s value depends on what they have, what they do, what others – especially providers think of them...This is the construct of the false self” (Pennington 2000: 31). When the woman has a deep experience of God’s total love and acceptance which is facilitated by the Exercises process, that love reflects back to the woman her true worth and value and allows her to connect more deeply with her true self.

At times the old voices and representations seem to create dissonance within the process. In the case of one woman (Int. 5) her need to perform became a need to impress her director in the retreat which reinforced her old “performer” voice until this dynamic was recognized by director and directee. Some of the women spoke about finding a new more positive image of God but at times reverting to the older, more

entrenched image of God. It was important for the director to be able to remind them of and draw them back to the emerging images of God and self.

The women described experiencing a new level of self-acceptance which enabled them to let go of previously necessary defenses and dominant ways of engaging with other people. As they became more accepting of themselves they also became more accepting and less judgemental of others. One woman in the early stages of the Exercises (D. Int. 2) described herself as more confident in being able to make her own decisions and more peaceful with those decisions and at the same time noticed that she felt less critical and judgemental of younger teachers and that the Exercises were enabling her to be less critical and intolerant.

An aspect which emerged strongly in the interviews was a growing sense of self-confidence and a new sense of feeling comfortable with themselves. As the relationship with God/Jesus becomes increasingly significant there is less need for them to look for external validation of their worth. Either the new relationship becomes the place where validation is sought or they internalise the sense of acceptance experienced within that relationship. I argue that the growing sense of secure attachment with (at first significantly) the director and more importantly God allows for a lessening of defensive mechanisms.

## **6.6 HOW ARE THESE SHIFTS FACILITATED?**

I will discuss the possible mechanisms by which I believe these revisions in image of God and self might take place in relation primarily to the work of some object-relations theorists including Kohut (1971) Winnicott (1965, 1971) and Ulanov (2001) and the dialogical-self theory of Hermans and Kempen (1993, 1996)

From an object-relations perspective one possible explanation for this shift may be related to a repaired experience of early mirroring. For the very young child it is vital that they experience themselves as admired by the maternal object. Winnicott (1971) and Kohut (1971) “describe this phenomenon of need for reflection of oneself by the other or the mirror as a core experience in the process of becoming human” (Rizzuto 1979: 185). It is in this mirroring process that the child comes to see him or herself as

who he or she is. In this process, two vitally important structures come into being; a sense of the mother and of the self (Kohut 1971 in Rizzuto 1979: 185). If the mother mirrors back to the child what she wants him or her to be for herself the mirroring function is distorted and the child has to engage defensive mechanisms for its survival and functioning.

In the Exercises Ignatius uses the image of gaze frequently. At the moment of entering the prayer the retreatant is asked to imagine God looking at her “A step or two in front of the place where I am to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the length of an Our Father, raising my mind above and considering how God our Lord is looking at me...” (Sp. Exx: 75). This experience of entering into prayer each time with the awareness of being looked at is significant. How does the woman see herself reflected in God’s gaze?

Some of the women talked about this aspect as being particularly significant in their experience of making the Exercises. For Ntabiseng,<sup>94</sup> one of the women in the case studies presented in chapter five, this aspect of God really looking at her was what gave her a sense of her own beauty and value.

As discussed in chapter three, Baldwin and Holmes (1987) developed a theory of the private audience and suggest that how we imagine significant others to be looking at us and reacting to us is directly related to the sense of self. Throughout the Exercises Ignatius in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Addition (Sp. Exx.75) encourages the retreatant at the beginning of each prayer period to imagine God looking at him or her. God becomes the one who sees the woman at every moment and she begins to live in an awareness of what his response is to her. In the presence of a loving and affirming “audience” there is less need to prove her value by seeking to act in ways which would elicit the approval or love of significant others.

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<sup>94</sup> Not her real name

## **6.7 THE IMAGINAL SPACE AS THE LOCUS FOR CHANGE IN IMAGE OF GOD AND IMAGE OF SELF**

The Exercises provide an unusually intensive opportunity to revise the God-representation and even the self-representation. This process of sustained engagement with their God-representations and more significantly with God, resulted in substantial revisions in both their God-representations and their self-representations. Both the external structure of the Exercises and the sustained imaginal contemplations create a context which allows the retreatant a space in which to both create and discover a personal, relational God. The Exercises are made within a contained structure and dynamic. The woman commits to pray each day for approximately one hour and to meet with the director ideally for about an hour on a weekly basis over the period of nine months to a year on average. This provides a frame similar in some respects to analysis in which there can be an intense and focused engagement within two containing spaces; the relationship with God through imaginative prayer and the relationship with the spiritual director.

For Winnicott (1971) analysis is about the creation of spaces: between the unconscious and conscious, the analyst and the patient, the psyche and spirit. He locates the numinous “in the space between self and other, in the human realm, and between the human and divine, in the religious realm” (Ulanov 2001: 5). Ulanov maintains that shifts occur “in the space between our experience of our self and our experiences of God” (Ulanov 2001: 6). The process of the Spiritual Exercises deliberately creates those spaces. There is firstly the space of the relationship between God and the directee highlighted in the daily space for prayer. There is the space between the director and directee which exists not only in their weekly meeting but also in the on-going awareness of each other. This space provides sufficient safety or containment for the retreatant to engage with her God-representation. There is also the space created in the imagination, which Winnicott (1971) describes as transitional space.

Although most of the women interviewed speak of coming to the Exercises after having engaged in other experiences such as Centering prayer groups, they seem not

to have had the opportunity to revise their images of God in the intensive way that making the Spiritual Exercises seems to have enabled. They come into the process with their God-representations formed from their early object-relations, generally modified only conceptually by subsequent involvement with teaching about God. It is difficult to form an intimate relationship with a God who carries negative, distant, or ambivalent emotional resonances, even where intellectually there is a belief that God is unconditionally loving and nurturing. It may however be that this dissonance provides the impetus for the search to encounter experientially what is only real to the person conceptually.

Ulanov (2001: 22-27) writes about two types of God images: “objective-object” God-images and “subjective-object” God images. She claims that both of these are important and it is in the space between them that we can encounter God, the objective-subject. Objective-object God-images are those images of God which are inherited as part of the broader religious tradition and which are handed down to us through our institutional experience of church religion. They are the shared well of experience that we have inherited and that we can discover through our scripture and religious traditions. The subjective-object God images which Rizzuto (1979) describes as our “pet Gods” are those which we create spontaneously in our imagination.

This subjective-object God functions to keep us and our group in being, conferring a sense of self on us that we ourselves help to create. Like a mother between her infant and the external world, this me-God that reflects us back to ourselves serves as a bridge between us and the infinite that makes the infinite real to us in our personal lives. This me-God also differentiates that impersonal infinite into a form to which we can relate (Ulanov 2001: 24).

But we must endow our image of God with parts, often unconscious, of our subjective experiences. Otherwise God will not seem real to us. God will remain an object outside ourselves, one we hear about, even feel exhorted to revere, but which does not compute into any real terms for ourselves. Our subjective-object God images function to hold us in being both personally and as a group, making us feel alive and real, with a bridge to the infinite. We talk to this God and believe God talks to us. We know God with some degree of intimacy as living in our midst, not remote or impersonal or looking to notice the tiny likes of us (Ulanov 2001: 23).

In order for our subjective-object God images to have potency they need also to be invested with our current desires, concerns and experience. The majority of the women interviewed in describing their experience of coming into the Exercises, describe a God-representation which is derived to a large degree from their own early object-relations but which is also strongly influenced by what they have been taught about God through school or church catechesis. They do not yet have an experience of God which is neither inherited nor externally imposed. They have not had the opportunity to discover their own God. They have not fleshed-out their own image of God. Their subjective-God images are inadequate or not current. It is difficult to separate out the women's objective-object God images and their subjective-object God images. However what is clear is that the composite image of God pre-Exercises was most often one which was distant and transcendent, which suggests that the objective-God images tended to be more developed than their subjective-God images.

Perhaps in the Exercises as women start to allow themselves to invest in and, in a sense, "create" this God out of their own needs and experience, their subjective-God image is strengthened in a way that allows more intimacy. As the women pray with Jesus in the Second and Third Weeks in particular they are confronted with the immanence of God in the incarnation. God takes on flesh for them, not only theologically but their God-image also becomes enfleshed. The women speak of coming to know Jesus as a "*real*" person, someone they can relate to and engage with who is connected with their own experience. They use the language of encounter. "I met Jesus for the first time" (Int. 1). Perhaps in order for relationship to become possible the woman needed to invest something of her own desire and need to "create" the missing experience of relational intimacy.

Ulanov argues that,

our subjective God-images bring what we leave out and must own. Wholeness costs. The psyche presses for its fulfillment. But this means including all our inferior parts, the undeveloped young parts (Ulanov 2001: 33).

She claims that our subjective-God images bring back to us those parts of ourselves that we have projected outwards, enabling us to reclaim them "...we are led to more

and more parts of ourselves to knit into our identity” (Ulanov 2001: 105). In other words, the God we partly create in our subjective-God image reflects aspects of ourselves that we have not dealt with and integrated and the God we are drawn to project onto most strongly in our objective-God image also reflects what needs to be owned and integrated. Our subjective-God images therefore perform an important psychic function.

We need to examine our subjective images for God, our me-God, to discern the projected elements, not to reject it. God-images perform the psychological function of bringing into our awareness what we need to claim and integrate...Second we need to pay attention to which official version of God we choose to single out for repeated projection (Ulanov 2001: 105).

One woman who described her relationship with her husband as very difficult found in her experience of praying the Wedding at Cana a romantic love relationship with the man Jesus in which she experiences herself as being in love with him. Through the experience of writing letters to him she encountered him as “a real person”. She said “it changed the relationship completely and maybe something...I don’t know maybe something which as a woman I really needed” (Int. 11). She seemed to be referring implicitly to a sense of being found desirable as a woman by a man, something which she was not able to experience in her relationship with her husband, but which was important for her emotionally, and which she discovered in the experience of the imaginal prayer.

Ulanov is insistent that it is only in the space between the images which emerge as our own unique experience of God and the images of the God of tradition, that we can discover God.

But any of us who look to our experience for information about this object God will know that we land irrevocably in between the God that tradition gives us and the God we create out of the stuff of human life” (Ulanov 2001: 20).

Only by attention to the space between our subjective-object God-images and the objective-object God-images of tradition can we discover the objective-subject God who waits there, in that space to meet us (Ulanov 2001: 37).

I argue that the Exercises create just such a space for the person to engage both subjective-object and objective-object God images. Its dynamic and meditations present objective-object God images while at the same time the imaginal process of the prayer allows subjective-God images to emerge or to be strengthened. In the space between God reveals God's-self. The Exercises themselves are comprised largely of meditations and contemplations on scripture. Each time the woman engages in Gospel Contemplation she is invited to engage with the person of Jesus who is the objective-object image of God. However in bringing her own experience into dialogue with the Jesus of the Gospel a subjective-God image is also created. This can be graphically seen in the experience of the woman who prayed the story of Martha and Mary. She prays with the content of the story but brings her own need for someone who can identify with her struggles and experience as a woman. In her prayer the image of Jesus is transformed into a female figure who is able to meet her internal need for her experience as a woman to be understood.

The process of imaginative contemplation allows the objective story of the life of Jesus to interact with the subjective, personal story of the life experience of the woman. As one woman said,

Yes. It is wonderful and thinking things like when I held my son for the first time and my dreams for him, my love that I had and here I am with Mary and she is going through the same thing. Even just the idea that we were both mothers, just so special- and I was thinking if my sister had to do these Exercises - she has never had a child how different would her experience have been to mine (D. Int. 3).

The Exercises provide a space to process life experiences from the perspective of engaging with objective-object images. When the woman is able to reencounter her own experience in dialogue with the experience of Jesus or Mary, it becomes more possible to integrate that experience. Perhaps the dynamic is similar to that of working through early object-relations in the transference. The woman who was afraid to look at Jesus during the crucifixion in case her love for Jesus was not returned with the same intensity recognized this dynamic in her early childhood experience. She had experienced that her love for her own mother had not been reciprocated at the same intensity which had been a devastating experience. When during the prayer on the burial Mary tells her "Take him, hold him. He loved you" she is given a different

experience of reciprocated love. This encounter enables the healing experience of the early psychic wound.

Ulanov suggests that in the space between our subjective-God images and our objective God-images, “The gap is crossed from God’s side bringing the new” (Ulanov 2001: 12). If this is the case it would help to explain psychologically the marked shifts in image of God which were described by the women interviewed. However this moves beyond the scope of this chapter and will be addressed in the subsequent chapter which looks at the women’s experience from a theological perspective. Even leaving aside the theological perspective it seems clear that psychological shifts can take place as a result of bringing unresolved issues and unmet needs into a sustained process of imaginal dialogue.

### **6.8.1 The role of imaginal dialogue**

The women in this study describe imaginal prayer, primarily Gospel Contemplation, as pivotal in the shift in their image of God and self. In this section I intend to examine the psychological dynamics which may occur during imaginal prayer, in particular, Gospel Contemplation and colloquy. Hermans and Kempen (1992, 1993) whose theory of The Dialogical Self was introduced in chapter three, maintain that the self is both multifaceted and multivoiced. The dialogical self can be conceptualised as an imaginal landscape within which multiple distinct “I-positions” are located. The self takes on a particular “I position at a given moment and moves constantly between different these “I-positions”

The terms voice and position can be metaphorically used to depict the dialogical self as an imaginal space that is stretched between a variety of positions. The self then is successively, or even simultaneously located at different positions in an imaginal landscape and is able to move between these positions. In short the self is a process of dialogical movements in an imaginal space (Hermans 1996: 32)... In a dialogical self... the elements (positions) function in a relatively autonomous ways: They may agree and disagree, interrogate, criticize and even ridicule one another (Hermans 1996: 42)...A position is like another person in the self, with his or her own voiceable perspective (Hermans 1996: 44).

The process of engaging in Gospel Contemplation highlights the movement between different “I” positions as the woman takes on different personas within the story. For example in the story of the nativity one woman describing her prayer identifies at different moments with Joseph and then with Mary, and could even have taken on the position of the baby Jesus who she held. Each of these could be seen as potential “I” positions.

According to Dialogical Self theory the on-going development of identity takes place in relationship both intrapsychically and interpersonally and often through so-called imaginal dialogue in which the other is not physically present. Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon (1992) draw on the work of Watkins (1986) who maintains that imaginal dialogue is a ubiquitous and important aspect of on-going identity development. We are constantly in dialogue. Sometimes this is with aspects of ourselves which may be in disagreement with each other. At other times we engage in a mental, interior dialogue with our parents, whether alive or dead, with a mentor or absent friend. We are able to imagine their response whether verbal or non-verbal. The inner dialogues are a significant part of what shapes our sense of self.

However Hermans (2004) alerts us to power differences in the self. Not all of the “I-positions” are equally strongly developed and some of the voices may be silenced.

The influence of institutional and societal expectations and norms comprises not only dialogues between different individuals, but also dialogues within individuals. The desire to take a day off, may involve two parts of the self in negotiation or conflict, for example, the hard-working scientist and the enjoyer of life. In a society in which hard working and competition is strongly encouraged, the enjoyer of life may be suppressed or ‘silenced’ by the ambitious part of the self. (Hermans 2004: 16-17).

Waaijman (1980) highlights Hermans and Kempen’s view that not all “I-positions” are equally strong or developed suggesting that some positions may be dormant, suppressed or even cast out while others may dominate.

The process of Gospel Contemplation is one in which the retreatant is invited into a sustained process of imaginal dialogue in a unique space of possibility. This process

happens both intrapsychically as different inner selves identify with different characters in the Gospel story and interpersonally between the person and the image of God or Jesus which is imagined. The retreatant is invited to enter into the scene by means of the dialogical imagination in order to experience the event as if he or she were present. He or she is also encouraged to enter more deeply into the event by taking on the position of someone in the story. If the story is prayed a number of times it may be prayed with the person imagining him or herself into several different characters. In imagining herself in various different characters and situations and identifying with different protagonists the person is able to engage dialogically with different inner selves. Dialogical Self theory suggests that at any time some inner selves will be privileged while others are subjugated. Gospel Contemplation may offer a space in which some of the previously subjugated selves are given a voice and allowed to enter the dialogue. As the contemplation unfolds, the exercitant is encouraged to engage with God as Father, or (most-often) with Jesus, or Mary. This may happen through interior dialogue or non-verbally - for example in the experience of holding or caring for the baby Jesus when contemplating the nativity. In describing what about the process had enabled her to discover Jesus and fall in love with him one woman said, "I think it was probably that whole Second Week bit of going right the way through with Jesus and the colloquies and talking if you like-experiencing a kind of dialogue between him and me" (Int. 11).

Hermans and Kempen (1993) argue that as we take on different "I positions the self is expanded. Similarly Ulanov asserts that "one effect of meditation on God is just this enlargement of self" (Ulanov 2001: 33). Hermans (2001) and Ulanov (2001) both talk about the enlargement or expansion of the self but understand the underlying mechanism slightly differently. For Hermans, dialogical interaction between different "I-positions" or inner voices enables a fuller, richer, constellation of the self" (Ulanov 2001: 33). This especially takes place when previously silenced or subjugated voices are allowed to participate in the dialogue. Each of the people in the Gospel story allows an indirect possibility for one of these selves to emerge. Ulanov suggests that our subjective God-images are formed out of our introjections and projections. For Ulanov, "Our subjective God-images reflect back to us the most important pieces of what we project outwards" (Ulanov 2001: 33). They enable us to take our projections

back. What we have disowned in ourselves as unacceptable is offered back to us. “These subjective God-images reflect these bits to us, make us notice them, converse with them, accept them. So it is that the subjective God-images feed us, adding to our self” (Ulanov 2001: 33). Gospel Contemplation provides the opportunity for enabling both the mechanisms of taking our projections back (Ulanov: 2001) and of dialogical interaction between different “I-positions” (Hermans: 2004)

Gospel Contemplation may present an alternative imaginal landscape in which the self is able to experience and integrate different, sometimes previously subjugated inner voices.

A person can, in an imaginal space, move from the present to the past or to the future and back. When the person comes back, he or she has more or less been changed by the dialogical process itself” (Hermans 1996: 33). The self has the capacity of multiple positioning with the possibility of an emergence of new knowledge as a result of dialogical interchange (Hermans 1996: 43).

Each inner self or “I” position exists in space and time and in relation to particular people or situations. Gospel Contemplation allows for engaging with a totally different imaginal space, for example Bethlehem just over 2000 years ago. This different time and space and relational engagement from the perspectives of different people in the Gospel stories allows for the emergence of new or formerly suppressed “I-positions”. These in turn are dialogued with other more familiar “I-positions” leading to a potential shift in the overall sense of self.

The notion of different voices is also helpful in understanding shifts in image of God and self. In imaginative contemplation the retreatant is able to “try on” new voices. For example the young black woman presented in the case study tried on the voice of Mary Magdalene. She began by seeing her as a role model, a significant other who would journey with her. “For me she became this person who listened to what God was saying to her rather than what the other person is saying or what the community is saying. I started trusting in her a lot because she came from a similar community as me.” Slightly later she says “I started standing on my own which became a lovely thing for me. I needed my own freedom rather than the community’s freedom” (Int. 3). It may be that Mary Magdalene’s attitude was one she felt she wanted to emulate,

but I would argue that in praying from the perspective of Mary Magdalene she had the opportunity to strengthen an underdeveloped inner voice which was saying something different to the external and internalised voices of her family and community experience.

Hermans maintains that,

A voice may be dominant for a long time, but suddenly a phase transition may take place, that is, a competing voice that was hitherto dormant may awake and cause a transformation of one's view. A particular voice, often disagreeing with other voices emerges from obscurity and proclaims itself an active member of the community of selves (Hermans 1996: 35).

### **6.8.2 Imaginal dialogue with Jesus in Gospel Contemplation**

Not only can they “try on” the voices of other people in the Gospel encounter with Jesus and in so doing potentially develop new “I-positions” but more significantly the woman making the Exercises enters into an intentional and sustained imaginal dialogue with the person of Jesus. The women in the study talk about getting to know Jesus as a real person and entering into an intimate relationship with him. Hermans draws extensively on the work of Watkins (1986) and maintains that imaginal dialogues “constitute an essential part of one's narrative construction of the world” (Hermans 1996: 41).

In the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat there is a sustained experience of daily imaginal interactions, in particular during the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks in which the life of Jesus is prayed imaginatively. That interaction seems to elicit previously subjugated selves because the way in which the women experience Jesus looking at them and relating to them is often very different from their dominant experience in relationships. The young woman who grew up having to care for her dying father and grand-parents from a very young age (Int. 2) had strong inner voices of responsibility and guilt. Her mode of relating was always as the care-giver for the other. She had also related to God and to Jesus out of the same space of needing to care for him. When she encountered Jesus in the desert in her imaginative contemplation he was nurturing of her and filled with joy and playfulness. This

previously unknown experience of relating to another who was not in pain and needing her comfort allowed a different younger and more playful inner voice which had previously been totally subjugated to emerge.

In some ways, certainly in its initial movement, Gospel Contemplation is strongly reminiscent of projective techniques in the way in which it enables both conscious and unconscious material to be accessed. One woman described Gospel Contemplation as “a subversive way of getting me to surrender” (Int. 1). In entering into the Gospel Contemplation the person brings him or herself into dialogue with a story or situation which is partially structured, but in which there remains quite substantial freedom as to how it is entered into. The combination of some structure and a considerable flexibility in engaging with it, is a powerful one. How the person imagines the story, who she becomes, what is said in the conversations with the other characters is partially a function of what is happening in that person at that time. If the person is able, as should ideally begin to happen, to let go conscious control and to allow the event to unfold spontaneously, then deeper more unconscious levels of the person are engaged. Ulanov suggests states that “dreams do not separate us from reality but rather make a bridge between our interior and exterior world” (2001: 3) and something similar could be said for Imaginative Contemplation. Questions, anxieties and desires which are not conscious may safely be allowed a space to emerge in the prayer. Reflecting on the prayer later, the person may become conscious of concerns or conflicts which emerged in the Imaginative Contemplation. The integration of those insights may be a mechanism of psychological development.

At times new images appeared to emerge spontaneously in the imaginative contemplation. “Subjective God-images do not arise from dreams alone” (Ulanov 2001: 22). In the experience of the woman who found that Jesus suddenly transformed into the figure of a woman (Int. 4) this can be seen very strongly. For this woman something in the process of the imagination evoked feminine images. “I went in praying to God as a loving Father- but when I got deeply into the prayer I was always connecting with more a Mother feel” (Int. 4). It seems that on an intellectual/conceptual level she imaged God as Father, but when she went deeply into

the prayer more unconscious images, which mirrored her own identity as a woman and a mother emerged spontaneously.

## **6.9 THE SPACE BETWEEN DIRECTOR AND DIRECTEE**

As has been noted previously (chapter two) in the text of the Exercises Ignatius is very clear that once the Exercises are in progress the director is to play a very hands-off role, allowing the “Creator to deal directly with the creature” (Sp. Exx: Ann 15). However in the findings of this study it was evident that the directors played a significant role for many of the women, particularly in the early stages of the Exercises process. It also seemed evident that the spiritual direction relationship was a significant factor in facilitating a shift in image of God and self and what the women described as the development of a more intimate relationship between themselves and God. While keeping the focus on the directee’s experience of God, in applying the Exercises to meet the developmental needs of the particular retreatant the directors were quite active and even directive at times. They reminded directees of significant consolations and encouraged them to be trust their experience in the Exercises when they regressed into self-doubt or old unhelpful patterns of relating. When Gospel Contemplation proved difficult some suggested alternative ways of praying imaginatively such as writing letters to and from Jesus as a character in the Gospel story or using images or poetry to help the woman to connect with Jesus.

Hardy maintains that insights from Winnicott “into the nature and dynamics of personal relationships can illuminate and enrich an understanding of the interpersonal dynamics inherent in Christian spiritual direction” (Hardy 2000: 266). Hardy (2000) concurs with the spiritual direction’s emphasis on the primacy of the relationship between God and the directee. However, he is critical of the dominant trend in the recent literature on spiritual direction which underplays the significance of the spiritual direction relationship itself, arguing that it is a mistake to underestimate the dynamics of the relationship between the directee and the spiritual director. He follows Winnicott (1971) in stressing the importance of the relationship as a facilitating environment. Although Winnicott is talking about the analytic process, Hardy extends Winnicott’s theory to assist a better understanding of the spiritual

relationship process. He suggests that “Christian spiritual and direction can be characterised as unfolding in what Winnicott (1971) calls “transitional space” and “potential space” and that,

redescribing the relationships between directors and their directees in this way encourages directors to: a) be particularly attentive to each directee’s unique unfolding developmental needs; b) facilitate on-going transitions ; and c) nurture various forms of experiencing as they emerge in the process of direction (Hardy 2000: 268).

Hardy (2000) affirms the importance of all human facilitating relationships as important in themselves. I agree with Hardy’s assertion that directees have different needs as they develop and grow in their relationship with God and therefore that the role of the director and the relationship between director and directee will change over time. Spiritual direction in this understanding provides a containing and facilitative environment for spiritual and psychological development to take place from a Winnicottian perspective,

spiritual direction can be understood as a holding environment where directors, like mothers and therapists, provide reliable ego support when their directees need it; holding them until a sense of spiritual self can emerge (Hardy 2000: 268).

There are multiple levels of dialogical engagement which take place within the Exercises process. One of the levels of dialogical engagement which was described by all but one (Int. 13) of the women interviewed as very important is that which takes place between the director and the retreatant. Against the backdrop of the findings of this study we may suggest that a triadic relationship, or triadic transitional space, developed between retreatant, director and God, with the retreatant functioning in a parallel dialogical relationship with God and with the director, with each relationship reciprocally influencing the other. The direction relationship creates a containing space which holds the process and provides another level of dialogical exchange in which the shifts taking place in the woman’s image of God and self through her prayer are affirmed and consolidated.

It is interesting that the women seem to have valued quite an engaged approach on the part of the director. This may be because so many are grappling with dominantly

negative voices with regard to their image of self and therefore need, at least initially, the director's alliance with the shifts taking place. The director is another significant voice which confirms and affirms the positive new voices which emerge in the directee's experience of imaginative prayer. When the woman discovers a new or previously dormant inner voice in response to her experience in Gospel Contemplation, the other more entrenched voices are often still stronger. If the new voice is not to be drowned out by the previously dominant voices the director may have to ally herself with the emergent new voice. In this sense the director's voice becomes a powerful and affirming echo of the emergent voice within the retreatant. Several women in the study described talked of the importance of the director helping her to hold onto and remind her of shifts which were not yet firmly established so that she would not lose the tentative new voice before it had taken hold and become strong enough to be clearly heard. This was particularly important when the external voices of people in the woman's life were allied with her previously dominant voices. For example the woman who was in charismatic church in which she was hearing the message that you needed to continuously strive to please God and win his approval, needed her director to affirm the emergent voice which said that she was loved and acceptable as she was.

As Ulanov asserts,

To live our creative self we need another to reflect back to us our spontaneous gestures and discoveries. Lacking such an other, or finding instead...others who refuse to see that self and who try to annul the self by asserting that nothing exists there to find or create, leaves us resourceless with an unmet dependency. We cannot 'do' in any satisfying way because we cannot "be" (Ulanov 2001: 135).

Trust in the direction relationship was spoken about by many of the women as critically important. Having a safe place in which to talk about their experience in the Exercises was critically important. That transitional space enabled some of the women to be in touch with their own vulnerability and not just their professional roles.

One woman (Int. 5) recognized the direction relationship as initially a hindrance in her experience of the Exercises. In this case in the transference the director was allied with the old dominant voice of the achiever seeking recognition from the other and

therefore worked in opposition to the inner shifts that were taking place. Because of the power of the direction relationship it has the potential to work negatively as well as positively. However once this had been recognized and voiced within the direction relationship the retreatant was able to disengage from that inner voice. Had that recognition not have taken place the retreat experience might have reinforced the existing defensive patterns.

## **6.10 CONCLUSION**

The Spiritual Exercises take place in a matrix of relationships. There is the primary relationship between the person and God which is largely accessed via the God-representation. Another very significant relationship is that between the director and directee. This relationship creates a facilitative, holding environment for the person's relationship with God to change and deepen as the God-representation changes.

Rizzuto (1979) claims that God-representations are open to change, and that this change affects the internal psychic world of the person. In this chapter I argue that the Spiritual Exercises create a facilitative context in which many of the naturally occurring processes which lead to identity-change and expansion can be intensified. Imaginal and relational/dialogical processes are key and these processes operate in different levels but all of these contribute to a more positive God and self-representation. Firstly the Exercises may offer an experience of reparative mirroring through the experience of being seen in God's loving gaze. The experience of a growing secure attachment with God and the director allows for a diminishment of the need for defenses and for greater access to the true self. The Exercises also allow for the development of both Ulanov's (2001) subjective-object God and the objective-object God through bringing into dialogue the woman's unique life experience and the stories and images of the Christian tradition. I also argue that that the way in which the Exercises intensively use imaginal dialogue appears to contribute significantly to shifts in image of God and self. According to Dialogical Self theory the self develops and expands in response to situations of imaginal dialogue which significantly shape the on-going construction of identity. (Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon 1992; Hermans: 2004). Imaginal dialogue pervades the Spiritual Exercises in Gospel

Contemplation, colloquy and in the imaginative “considerations” of the Second Week, offering unusually intensive opportunities for the shifts in image of self and God. It was the experience of relational and imaginal processes in particular Gospel Contemplation and the supportive environment of the direction relationship which the women reported as most helpful in facilitating shifts in their image of God and self. These theories offer explanations for how these mechanisms may function.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN - INTERPRETATION FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

In the previous chapter I discussed the findings of the research from a psychological perspective. I presented the results of the interviews with women who have made the Spiritual Exercises in relation to the relational theories of the Dialogical Self Theory of Hermans et al (1992, 1993, 1996, 2003, 2004) and Object-Relations Theory, in particular the work of Winnicott (1965, 1960, 1971) and Rizutto (1979). In this chapter, my focus will be on interpreting what emerged from the interviews from a theological perspective. I argue that the Exercises do not only elicit a natural dialogical function within the person as they engage dialogically with different aspects of themselves, but also, much more significantly, create a space for dialogue between the person and God. This dialogical encounter between the person and God enables a relationship to develop in which the woman reportedly experiences both God and herself differently.

### **7.1 THE DIALOGICAL NATURE OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES**

The Spiritual Exercises are dialogical on a number of different levels. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, General of the Society of Jesus (1983-2008) reminds us that the Exercises are situated in the on-going dialogue of God with humankind. “God remains faithful to this dialogue, giving the creature the capacity to search out God’s individual design for each person and to fulfill it” (Kolvenbach 2003: 1). Kolvenbach further maintains that the Exercises involve dialogue between four actors: God, Ignatius (or the text of the Exercises), the person giving the Exercises and the person making them. The Exercises are thus made within a web of dialogical relationships in which the primary dialogue is that between the person and God. The life experience of the exercitant is also placed in dialogue with the material of the Exercises which consists predominantly of meditations and contemplations on the life of Jesus. These engage the person’s own story and experience with the salvation story presented in the

scriptures. According to Tetlow<sup>95</sup> the story of the Exercises (which is the story of creation and salvation history) meets the story (the subjective, lived experience) of the exercitant. It is in that dialogue between salvation history and the history of the individual exercitant that the Exercises may facilitate a process of profound spiritual transformation. As Endean notes: “Ignatius’s Exercises offer not a blueprint, but a resource for dialogue between the Christian tradition and the whole gamut of human experience” (Endean 1998: 47-48).

At the same time there is a dialogue which takes place between the exercitant and the one giving the Exercises. The director meets with the exercitant usually on a weekly basis. In that conversation, the exercitant shares his or her experience of the prayer times in particular, but at times may also talk about other significant aspects of her current experience as it relates to the prayer. The director listens, and on the basis of what he/she hears, proposes new material for prayer and makes recommendations where necessary as to how the exercitant might engage more fruitfully with the process.

Most significantly, there is the encounter with God for which these other dialogues dispose the exercitant. These other dialogical aspects of the process, for example, the relationship between director and directee, and the dialogical engagement within imaginative contemplation and colloquy, are designed to support and facilitate the primary dialogical relationship which is between God and the exercitant. In this chapter it is this primary dialogical relationship between God and the exercitant which is our focus. From a psychological point of view what has been considered is the person’s God-representation and how this may shift through the process of imaginal dialogue. Theologically we are concerned with a living God who is believed to be in relationship to the person in a way that may develop via the imagination, but also has a reality beyond it.

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<sup>95</sup> Notes from Fr Joseph Tetlow SJ’s presentation. Zimbabwe, December 1999.

## 7.2 THE THEOLOGY OF GRACE: GOD'S SELF-COMMUNICATION IN AND THROUGH OUR EXPERIENCE

The dialogical relationship between God and the creature is understood in theological terms as grace. One of the most significant recent contributions to theology is the shift in our understanding of grace from an ontological understanding to one which understands grace in terms of personal encounter. Scholasticism had understood grace as the effects of God's gifts. God would, for example in prayer and through the sacraments give some divine grace (termed "created grace") to the person. In this understanding God's grace is imposed from outside our human experience. The writings of Karl Rahner<sup>96</sup> inaugurated an understanding of grace as God's communication of God's self to the human person in and through human experience. Rahner argues that while we experience "created grace" these are effects of what is more fundamental - God's indwelling presence termed "uncreated grace" which we all already experience (more or less consciously).

This Trinitarian communication is the ontological ground of man's life of grace and eventually of the direct vision of the divine persons in eternity. It is God's 'indwelling', 'uncreated grace, understood not only as a communication of the divine nature but also and primarily, since it implied a free personal act, since it occurs from person to person, as a communication of 'persons'...God relates to us in a threefold manner, and this threefold, free and gratuitous relation to us is not merely a copy or an analogy of the inner Trinity, but this Trinity itself, albeit as freely and gratuitously communicated (Rahner 1970: 35).

Rahner prioritises God's gift of God's self, the divine indwelling, which is uncreated grace. Even if we have not yet responded to that gift of God's self it is present within and is this gift that prompts our desire and yearning for relationship with God.

Scholastic theologians viewed the natural and the supernatural as two distinct layers of reality but for Rahner our ordinary lives and experiences are shot through with God's grace. "In and through the physical, the finite-or, to use Rahner's language, the

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<sup>96</sup> Rahner, K. *Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace*. In *Theological Investigations 1* London: Darton Longman and Todd 1961) pp.297-317 and Rahner, K. *Nature and Grace in Theological Investigations 4* (London. Darton Longman and Todd 1964) pp. 165-188

categorical-we experience ourselves as transcendent, as open to God” (Endean 2001b: 14).

For Rahner it can be proved philosophically that ordinary human experience in any possible world presupposes a distant creator God; but the world in which we actually live is a graced world. Shaped by a miracle “that overshoots all your metaphysics”, the miracle of a self-communicating God (Endean 2001b: 17).

Rahner’s theology of grace as God’s self-communication to us in and through our experience is particularly helpful in understanding the process of the Exercises. Endean in his book *Rahner and the Spiritual Exercises* (2004) examines the claim that Rahner’s theology was profoundly shaped by the Ignatian theology implicit in the Exercises. Towards the end of his life Rahner reportedly said that Ignatian spirituality was the most important influence on his theology. Endean questions the extent to which this might be said to be true of Ignatian Spirituality as distinct from other forms of Spirituality but acknowledges that “the links between Rahner’s theology and Ignatian Spirituality are genuine and distinctive” (Endean 2001: 241). Certainly Rahner’s understanding of grace as relational, and not separate from human experience, are key to an understanding of the experience of making the Exercises. In this next section I will briefly present some of Rahner’s assumptions regarding grace as relational and the implications for how we understand the experience of the women interviewed who made the Spiritual Exercises.

At the deepest level Rahner affirms the fundamentally dialogical nature of prayer which before it is God’s communication with us, is God’s communication with God’s self.

If human beings experience themselves-in the unity of grace and their spirit-as what God speaks to God’s own self (and this as their distinctive identity, which as it is lived out specifically also involves God’s free self-impacting grace); and if they in prayer admit and freely accept this loved reality as God’s Word, a Word in which God is speaking Himself to humanity, then prayer is already dialogical, a dialogue with God (Rahner 2004: 89).

Rahner argues firstly that God relates to us in and through our human experience and therefore that God is present in that experience. Secondly, God who is transcendent,

also desires a relationship of closeness or intimacy with us. Thirdly, “if grace is correlative with human experience; grace must be as unsystematic and diverse as human beings are” (Endean 2001b: 35).

All three of these aspects were very much evident within the experience of the women interviewed. The context of the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat is one in which God’s communication, not only in prayer but in the activities of daily life is highlighted. The women commented on how the experience of their prayer spilled over into their everyday activities and relationships. There was a sense of growth in a relationship of closeness with God and for many of the women a move into what they described as an intimate relationship. For each, although the material and process were basically the same, the deepening of relationship happened in different ways depending on personal history and personality. Each woman’s experience was unique.

Even when grace works with seeming force and violence, it will still manifest itself through the agencies or mechanisms of temperament, taste, personality and biography. This has momentous consequences because it is the root and ground of a genuine pluralism in the experience of God and his grace. It should not be surprising to find real variety and even great differences in the experience of the same love of God (Haight 1979: 14-15).

The movement in the experience of the women interviewed, which is first identified by Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001: 241) in their work with women making the Exercises, is one which moves from “transcendence to immanence to intimacy”. Rahner argues that this is fundamental to the experience of making the Spiritual Exercises, claiming that the Exercises are about “helping people towards the immediate experience of God, in which people realise that the mystery past all grasp that we call God is near, can be spoken to...” (Rahner 1978: 380 in Endean 2001b: 17).

It is only through this doctrine that we can take with radical seriousness and maintain without qualifications the simple statement which is at once so very incomprehensible and so very self-evident, namely that God himself as the abiding and holy mystery, as the incomprehensible ground of man’s existence, is not only the God of infinite distance, but also wants to be the God of absolute closeness in a true self-communication, and he is present in this way in the spiritual depths of our existence as well as in the concreteness of our corporeal history (Rahner 1970: 137).

This discovery of the nearness of God was a critical aspect of the experience for almost all the women interviewed. The realisation of the humanity of Jesus and the engagement with him, which was facilitated by the use of imaginative and dialogical methods of prayer, was key in enabling an experience of God as immanent and as one with whom it is possible to have an intimate relationship. God, who through the divine on-going self-communication, can be experienced by human beings.

### **7.3 SHIFTS IN IMAGE OF GOD AND IMAGE OF SELF**

Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon Au assert that “our images of God are critical to our religious experience because we meet God as the one we image God to be” (Au and Au 2006: 100).

As was discussed in more detail in Chapter Five *Analysis of Themes which Emerged from the Interviews* the women interviewed all reported shifts in their image of God and all but one<sup>97</sup> a corresponding shift in image of self. In the previous chapter we looked at this from a psychological point of view, using the concepts of the “dialogical self”; “imaginal space” and the “private audience”. Prior to making the Exercises, women described their images of God as benevolent but transcendent; ambivalent (loving or punitive depending on one’s behaviour), or positive but lacking in intimacy. The women reported that the experience of making the Exercises shifted their image of God to a relational image which for each woman was distinctive and positive. For example; a love relationship in which there is “an intimate relationship of knowing and loving” (Int. 1); “A God of creative abundant energy (Int. 2); The God of life, of touching; the one who understands me.” (Int. 3); “a creating mother” (Int. 5); “My beloved and my friend” (Int.7).

Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that God is mystery and therefore beyond any image we may construct.

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<sup>97</sup> Int. 13. This woman felt that her image of self did not change in the Exercises. She also did not talk in particularly relational terms about her experience of God or Jesus.

The reality of God is mystery beyond all imagining. So transcendent, so immanent is the holy mystery of God that we can never wrap our minds completely around this mystery and exhaust divine reality in words or concepts (Johnson 1993: 7).

Nonetheless we also believe that God reveals something of God's self to us through creation, through scripture, and most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. It seems that in order for the women to develop meaningful and positive relationships with God it was necessary for them to be able to flesh out an image of God with whom they could engage. Within the context of that relationship, God then continues to reveal God's self in ways that meet the woman at her place of greatest emotional and spiritual need. Spiritual directors are particularly concerned about the person's image of God because they recognise its significance for the person's deepening relationship with God. Where there is a negative or inadequate image of God this presents a significant obstacle to the development of an intimate personal relationship.

Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) highlight the importance of "image of God" and the particular difficulties which some women may experience with unhelpful images engendered by experiences of abuse of different kinds or by a socialisation into immaturity.

Images of God as judge, tyrant, beyond caring, oppressive and domineering are common among women, particularly those who have experienced psychological, physical or sexual abuse. On the other hand, and equally unhelpful, God can also be experienced only as comforting allowing a pseudo-independent, immature relationship that never challenges one to assume responsibility. Both of these unhelpful and incomplete or even destructive extremes need to be recognised and challenged. The heart of the matter is God-image. (Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert 2001: 106).

Ignatius himself reportedly delayed taking Peter Favre, one of the first companions, into the Spiritual Exercises for six years because his image of God and self were so negative. This recognition of how crucial an adequate image of God is for the person to enter fruitfully into the process is in large part the purpose of the disposition days or preparatory days which directors giving the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat may extend for several weeks before taking the exercitant into the Exercises. For several of the women interviewed, the shift towards a more adequate image of God happened during

the time of on-going spiritual direction in the year or two prior to making the Exercises. One striking example of this may be seen in the case study of Lisa (see Chapter 5). She started with Ignatian prayer methods in on-going direction two years prior to beginning the Exercises.

It was strongly evident in the research that prior to making the Exercises there was often a marked difference between the woman's professed image of God and her operative image. Au and Au assert that this is frequently the case,

It is not uncommon for our professed image (what we consciously believe and say is our image of God) to deviate greatly from our operative image (the actual image) that influences our thoughts, feelings and attitudes (Au and Au 2006: 112).

As women engaged in the process of making the Exercises the gap between their professed and operative images tended to narrow as they began to experience a loving God who desires to be in relationship with them.

In the reported experience of the women interviewed there were specific times in the Exercises which were highly significant for the development of image of God and image of self. The first was the period which includes the disposition days and the *Principle and Foundation* (Sp: Exx: 23). These meditations evoke the image of God the Creator. The shift which tended to happen in this period was related to a sense of God's creative love and the realisation that God created me out of love and therefore that I am valuable, good and loved. This realisation is particularly critical where the initial image of God has had strong negative aspects. It is also particularly significant for exercitants who may be making the Exercises in what John Veltri (1998) terms a "healing mode." According to Veltri,

what characterises directees in the Healing Mode is not so much the need for inner healing at this point in their life but rather their primary focus upon their own growth issues. Their predominant desire is for God's continuing help in dealing with these personal growth issues (Veltri 1998: 323).

It may be that for directees who are carrying considerable emotional pain or "baggage" the point of healing emotionally and spiritually is the experience of coming

to a changed image and experience of God and consequently in the light of that unconditionally loving gaze, to a more positive image of self.

As Ruffing puts it:

First there is always a correlation between our self-image and our image of God. as we undergo the process of growth and development our sense of ourselves forms and reforms on the basis of our experience. Automatically our self-image sets up a correlative image-pair with who God is to us, whether explicit or not (Ruffing 2000: 127).

Negative images of God are coupled with negative images of self which form a kind of mirror image and as image of God shifts so does image of self. It was this dynamic which was evident in the interviews. It may also be that shifts in image of self impact on image of God and the capacity for relationship with God. The relationship between shifts in image of God and self, means that these tend to shift in concert with each other. For example, while praying the *Principle and Foundation* (Sp. Exx: 23) and supporting biblical texts which were given by her director, a young woman reported experiencing a shift from an image of God as powerless and depleted and of herself as “never being enough” to an experience of God’s creative abundant energy and his delight in herself as “God’s cherished work of Art” (Int. 2). Another young woman consolidating the *Principle and Foundation* (Sp. Exx: 23) through painting the themes of her prayer, came to be able to embrace the image of the girl in her painting which she had previously rejected, and in that process experienced herself as loved, accepted and valued by God. For an older woman with intense experiences of emotional pain, who saw God pre-Exercises as distant and punitive, holding a sjambok to whip her if she did anything wrong; the words of the passage from Jeremiah 29 were key. “I know the plans I have in mind for you. Plans for peace and not disaster, reserving for you a future and a hope.” Her image of God shifted to that of “a God who loves me and who does not want to see me suffering” (Int. 10). This new image of God created in her a sense of new confidence in the face of other people’s discrimination and a healing of her grief.

When the exercitant is coming to the Exercises with a negative or ambivalent image of God the experience of a different God to the one which they had held, at least at an

operative level, tends to be a shift which can be seen quite dramatically and which has a correspondingly marked shift in image of self. This tended to take place in the disposition days/Principle and Foundation. For those who entered the Exercises with a more helpful image of God the shift is less dramatic and more subtle both in relation to image of self and image of God. For these women there tends to be more of a focus on a deepening intimacy. The women interviewed tended to highlight the Third Week as most significant in developing their relationship with God. This will be discussed further in the next section on relationality.

For a minority of the women both movements took place within the same experience of making the Exercises; a fundamental shift in image of God and a subsequent movement into a relationship of deep intimacy. For most however there was either an emphasis on a shift to a more positive image of God and self or, where a positive God and self image were already present, a shift into a relationship of deepened intimacy

It is my contention that the process of the Exercises enables unhelpful images of God (and self) to be discarded and to be replaced by more adequate ones as God reveals something of God's nature to the exercitant in the Exercises process. This shift in turn impacts on the way in which the directee experiences him/herself. The process is facilitated by the opportunities for active engagement with God (the imaginal other) and through dialogue with the spiritual director.

#### **7.4 RELATIONALITY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE**

Ruffing describes a correlation between self-image and God image (Ruffing 2000: 127) and argues that in order for a deep relationship to develop between the person and God he or she has to come to see themselves differently.

Development, change or growth in one's self-image is a psychological prerequisite not only for a positively construed relationship with God, but also for the radical mutuality with God that Jesus mediates forever (Ruffing 2000: 128).

There is something about this experience of discovering one's own inherent value in the eyes of the other (the Father or Jesus) that is healing. It is particularly healing when identity has been based on feeling valued only for what one achieves, or for being able to please the other, which seems to have been a key experience for many of the women interviewed.

Love of self for a woman is the conviction and perception that she is of infinitely great value and immense worth. A woman can come to this awareness of herself as a loved self in a variety of ways. She comes to the understanding that she has absolute value (Moessner 1991: 205).

Pennington writes about the impact of experiencing a true love relationship such as the women described discovering in the Exercises.

One of the great experiences of life is that first experience of being in love and being loved. Of course our parents love us. They have to, or so it seems, and siblings too. But the first time someone loves us for no other reason than that person has in some way perceived our true beauty, our true loveliness, we float. We are ecstatic. For we have seen in the eyes of the lover something of our own true beauty. The only way we really see ourselves is when we see ourselves reflected back to us from the eyes of one who truly loves us (Pennington 2000: 46).

From a theological perspective, shifts in image of God (and self) cannot be adequately explained solely by psychological processes such as I described in the previous chapter. The Exercises provide a context for sustained engagement with the Trinity, and in particular, through Gospel Contemplation with the person of Jesus. As the exercitant contemplates the mysteries of the life of Jesus, she comes to know and experience him, and to actively engage with him out of the perspective of her own life and history. The experience of being loved unconditionally and of being found lovable enables a relationship of intimacy and mutuality to become possible.

From a theological perspective, the transformation which takes place in the Exercises is not reducible to natural psychological processes such as imaginal dialogue. It may begin there, but at some point there is an encounter with God who is beyond all our images of the Divine. The women in the study describe such moments of encounter with the person of Jesus, and indeed highlight the development and deepening of that

relationship as the primary outcome of the Exercises. Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) highlight this movement into relationship.

The one making the Exercises begins by seeing her place in the universe, becoming a fallible but faithful follower of Jesus, rejoicing in Jesus' resurrection, and only after that, hearing the *language* of invitation to profound intimacy and mutuality with this God-in-Jesus. This progression moves from transcendence to immanence to intimacy. Since women usually develop by way of intimacy and relationship, the process of the Exercises can “work” for them provided relationship is continually stressed throughout the dynamic and the relationship with the one giving the Exercises is sensitive and freeing (Dyckman et al 2001: 241).

Rob Marsh (2006) writes about the shift from the more philosophical tone of the *Principle and Foundation* (Sp. Exx: 23) to the very intimate, relational tone of the *Contemplation to Attain Divine Love*. (Sp. Exx: 230-234). He suggests that the purpose of the Exercises is for “falling in love” and that it is precisely the experience of Gospel Contemplation that facilitates the shift to the relational.

He suggests that as we journey with Jesus in the Second Week, we come to know him and to develop our own unique relationship with him. At the beginning of the Second Week *The Kingdom Meditation* (Sp. Exx: 95) is focused on a king whose ideals we admire and whom we are invited to follow. By the end of the Second Week something has shifted and the exercitant finds herself in a personal relationship with this man Jesus.

A long week later, as Jesus goes to the cross, what dies is not just a dream or a project. It is my beloved. I'm not mourning my shattered hopes, my doomed calling. I'm mourning a man, a man I have come to love. At the start he was all abstraction and hope and activity; but by the end he is this man I have come to know intimately. I've watched his birth and held his warm weight; I've been there as he's grown up and been made man before me; I've seen his struggle and loved his laughter. I've gazed at him and found him gazing back; I've heard my name on his lips. I've been drawn into his friendship; I've watched him work, suffered his hardship, wrestled with his self-discovery. I've discovered I need him and been sweetly shocked that he needs me too. To repeat my puzzle: how can his death mean so much to me *now*, when a week ago he was just God? Something has happened. I have fallen in love (Marsh 2006: 8).

Marsh talks about the grace of the Second Week as an erotic grace, not only in the important sense of something we desire, but also in the sense of passion; what Marsh calls “the language of eros” (Marsh 2006: 9). It is in the exercitant’s coming to know and love Jesus and becoming aware experientially that she is known and loved that transformation happens. “The Second Week desire is not just to know *about* Jesus but to know *him*” (Marsh 2006: 9).

Isn’t it the *particulars* we fall in love with? The shape of *that* nose; the way he works with fish; the look in his eye; the things he can say to move me; the fire in his heart; the little hurts that bruise him (Marsh 2006: 8).

This erotic desire of the Second Week was very marked in the experience of many of the women interviewed. Interestingly it tended to be women in mid-life or older who shared this experience. (Int. 1; Int. 7; Int. 8; Int. 11; Int. 12). All of these women described the experience of falling in love with Jesus as they contemplated his life. One woman when asked what was most significant to her in her experience of making the Exercises said,

I think probably it was a sense of intimacy and certainly for me of falling in love with Jesus. God the father had always been very important to me but I struggled with Jesus-and yes there was a real sense of discovering Jesus and falling in love with him (Int. 12).

When asked what she thought had enabled that to happen she responded,

I think it was probably that whole Second Week bit of going right the way through with Jesus and the colloquies and talking if you like-experiencing a kind of dialogue between me and him and Mary- she was also important because Mary showed me her son (Int. 12).

Her response expresses the kind of experience of the Second Week which tended to be made by the women who were in their fifties or older.

Shifts in image of God and self in the Exercises are indeed shifts which lead to a deeper relationality. One can see this as a deeper union with God which according to Cusson (1988) is one of the key purposes of the Exercises. Many of the women interviewed highlighted a deepened and “real” relationship with Jesus as the most important outcome of the Exercises.

The progression in the development of the relationship is described by Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert as a movement from “transcendence to immanence to intimacy” (2001: 241). This is a movement which is strongly evident in the reported experience of the women interviewed. The experience of the Second Week seems to bring a new and vivid sense of Jesus’s humanity and of the immanence of God, while women frequently described the Third Week as the time of the deepest intimacy with Jesus. The woman whose experience of falling in love with Jesus in the Second Week said, “When I realised I really really loved Jesus was in the Third Week through that whole passion. I felt it most strongly then (Int. 12). Interestingly the woman who at the start of the Exercises described herself as having major problems with intimacy, which had been exacerbated by her recent divorce, found herself unable to enter the contemplations of the Third Week saying that she was afraid of the intimacy it might entail.

The Third Week assumed a significance with regard to the development of the relationship with Jesus which is not highlighted by most of the literature which highlights the Second Week as the climax of the Exercises and the place where the Election is made. This is not mentioned by Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) in their chapter on the experience of women in the Third Week but emerged strongly for many of the women in this study. It seems that an often non-verbal presence and profound empathy for the one they have come to know and love evokes a new depth of love. The women often mentioned the pain of not being able to do anything for Jesus in his passion and yet wanting to be with him. This desire seems to echo the story of the women in the Gospel who remained at the Cross. Is this something about the response of women or do these women identify with the women in the Gospel story?

## **7.5 THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN**

As discussed in Chapter Two, feminist theologians following the seminal work of Valerie Saiving (1979) have written a great deal in recent years about women’s experience as different in some significant ways from that of men. This study focused on the experience of women and can only compare it with the writings on Ignatian

Spirituality, the majority of which are still largely written from a male and Jesuit perspective. However it is worth examining the findings of the research in the light of the main themes identified by feminist theologians as important in the experience of many women.

Sandra Schneiders asserts that women often experience themselves as,

ever guilty, a nuisance, and can justify themselves only by unrelenting service, continual performance, and lowly self-effacement. For a woman to come to any real appreciation of what she means to God, not for what she does but for who she is, not despite her sins but because of her beauty, often requires intense effort in prayer and the wise support of a mature and liberated spiritual guide (Schneiders in Conn 1986: 43).

For some of the women this sense of having to justify themselves was very strong. It ranged from a sense of needing to make reparation simply for being alive (Int. 2) to needing to work hard enough to merit God's love (Int. 5; Int. 7; Int. 8).

Central to the work of feminist psychologists and theologians is the recognition of the importance of relationship. Their work challenges the notion that the goal of human development is separation and autonomy. Carol Gilligan in 1982 in her groundbreaking work *In a Different Voice* presented research which showed that women experience a different developmental process regarding moral issues to that observed in men. Previous research on moral development had been done most notably by Kohlberg<sup>98</sup> using a male population and the results generalized to include women. This flawed research process resulted in women's moral development being viewed as inferior to that of men. Gilligan noted that in women there was a fusion of identity and intimacy. Women described themselves in ways which reveal that "identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care" (Gilligan 1982: 72). By contrast in men's self-descriptions individual achievement was significant. "Great ideas or distinctive activity defines the standard of self-assessment and greatness" (Gilligan 1982: 75).

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<sup>98</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg. *The Development of Modes of Thinking and Choices in Years 10-16*. PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958.

Gilligan claims that “the critical experience then for women becomes not intimacy but choice, creating an encounter with self that clarifies the understanding of responsibility and truth” (Gilligan 1982: 76). What I am seeing in the experience of women making the Spiritual Exercises seems at face value to contradict that. The critical experience for most women in the Exercises is linked with intimacy but this seems to be a different kind of intimacy which leads to autonomy and the capacity for choice. Conn notes that “Intimacy goes along with identity as a woman comes to know herself through relationships with others” (Conn 1986: 19).

Intimacy with Christ which comes out of an experience of being unconditionally loved and accepted leads to a healthy sense of self. Exercitants talk about being more confident and at peace and more able to make their own decisions out of the experience of knowing themselves to be accepted and loved. It is an intimacy which leads to a greater sense of autonomy. They are less constrained by what others might think of their decisions. The sense of acceptance and unconditional love experienced in the relationship with God, frees the woman to become her whole self, unlike the experience of many human relationships where closeness can lead to the woman suppressing her deep desires in order to please the other.

Recent studies show that women’s behaviour that is praised as virtuous (i.e. loving) and mature (ie other directed) is often behaviour symptomatic of severe immaturity. Women spending themselves on their family, their students, patients or members of their religious community often have low self-esteem, and thus their emotional dependency makes them subtly very demanding on others for appreciation and adulation (Conn 1986: 11).

The movement experienced in the Exercises by most of the women interviewed, is not to greater self-sacrifice, but to a greater sense of self-acceptance and to discovering who she has been created to be. There is a sense that the self-giving prior to the process of making the Exercises often came not from a place of authentic self-sacrifice, but out of the unfree desire or attachment to winning love and approval. The Exercises generate a movement towards finding an identity that is not borrowed from others but is that given to the woman by God. This is in line with Moesser’s claim that “authentic self-sacrifice can only occur after a sense of self is formed” (Moesser 1991: 203).

## 7.6 DESIRE

Theologically-speaking our desire is always a response to God's desire for us, whether or not the person is conscious of that. The initiative always belongs to God.

The greatest surprise of all is that the prayer that we thought to be our own activity, our own reaching out, reveals itself instead as God's spirit moving in us. Our very desire to pray, that we took as our own, turns out to have a much larger source. We now see that the desires that we constructed through repeated efforts to pray, showing ourselves to ourselves, reflects God's desire moving us toward fuller being, towards the embrace of love (Ulanov 1982: 20).

In the Ignatian understanding of relationship with God, desire is key. Connor draws on the work of eminent scholar of the Exercises, Giles Cusson, who claims that the purpose of the Exercises is the activation and fostering of the "dynamism of desire" (Cusson 1988: 118 in Connor 2006: 37). Cusson sees the dynamism of desire as the connecting thread that runs through the entire course of the Spiritual Exercises and gives them their unifying thrust (Cusson 1988: 129). It is in and through the desires, which themselves are God-given, that we can draw closer to God.

the action of the Holy Spirit in us is not violent, it follows the bent of our being and orients to the true life, through the natural path of desire which it opens into infinite capacities. For Ignatius this spiritual desire which will animate him in everything is a gift from God (Cusson: 1988: 122).

Lonergan talks about desire as the dynamism or driving force within the human spirit arguing that "the eros of the human mind, the desire and drive to understand" (Lonergan 1957: 221) is intrinsic to every human being. He describes the dynamic of desire operative within our consciousness as,

attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible; it is a conscious intending, ever going beyond what happens to be given or known, ever striving for a fuller and richer apprehension of the yet unknown or incompletely known totality, whole, universe (Lonergan 1972: 13).

As Cusson reminds us, Ignatius in his Annotation 5 is very clear about the necessity for the exercitant to have a desire for openness and generosity toward God in entering into the Exercises. "It will be very profitable for the one who is to go through the

Exercises to enter upon them with magnanimity and generosity toward his Creator and Lord.”<sup>99</sup>

It was evident from the interviews that what drew the women into the Exercises was a desire of which they had frequently been aware for some time but which remained unmet. This accords with Rahner’s notion of uncreated grace. God is already present within her and engendering this desire. This desire for relationship with God impelled them to keep searching for a means of fulfilling that desire. The women interviewed described a desire for a closer, deeper, more intimate relationship with God as the primary reason for making the Exercises. Only one woman did not use the language of desire. She described her motivation for making the Exercises as being “out of interest” (Int. 13)<sup>100</sup>. Ignatian Spirituality speaks of the *Magis*, always looking for the “more” and it is this sense that is described; an inner conviction that the relationship with God could be “more”. Theologian Sebastian Moore locates the striving towards the divine, “in the fundamental human ‘desire to be desired by the one we desire’” (quoted in McDargh 1984: 356).

The exercitant is encouraged to ask explicitly at the beginning of each prayer time for the grace i.e. “that which I desire”. Once the retreatant has encountered Jesus in meditation or Gospel Contemplation there is a colloquy in which the desires which have arisen for the exercitant in that time of prayer can be articulated and so the initial desire is personally appropriated.

The work of a number of women who have written about the Exercises including Ruffing (2000) and Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) suggests that the issue of desire may be more complex for women than it is for men. In a context in which women may have learnt to suppress their desires, the Exercises may first entail a process of excavating and retrieving authentic desires. This seemed to be true for many of the women interviewed whose desires prior to making the Exercises had not been articulated. Instead the majority described themselves, in various ways, as

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<sup>99</sup> The Spiritual Exercises Annotation 5 Puhl translation.

<sup>100</sup> It was this woman who said that she had not been aware of any change in the way she perceived herself as a result of the process.

having been taken up with the desires of others, in particular family. The desires and expectations of significant others were dominant. For the three youngest women interviewed, the desires and expectations of their parents and families of origin were key. The young black woman described in the case study (Int. 3) carried a strong sense of her family and community's desire for her to get married and have children. One of the young white women, whose image of God shifted from masculine to feminine in the Exercises, needed to disentangle herself from her father's desires for her to achieve (Int. 5). The other young woman's identity had been shaped from a very early age as caretaker and nurturer of the physically frail adults in her family of origin. In each case the process of making the Exercises involved an experience of being freed from the desires and expectations of others. Many of the older women interviewed were trying to separate their own desires from those of their husband and children. The growth in intimacy with God/Jesus in which they find the freedom to be themselves becomes the way into greater autonomy and an identity which is less enmeshed with that of others. (The external voices which they hear from family or church community and which had become internalised no longer dominated.)

Janet Ruffing gives attention to this issue of desire and its implications for the process and dynamic experienced by woman in the Exercises. She suggests that the key difference in women's experience of the Exercises dynamic may be a difference in the particular desires which women bring to the process (Ruffing 2000: 16).

The sequence of desires is also expressed in the metaphors typical of masculine consciousness which is shaped by the hero's journey and begins with heroic ideals and quests and ends in intimacy in the latter stages. Women's process is a little more complex. For many women, life is in the details rather than in the heroic dream. Desire for women is frequently related to intimate relating. These desires may or may not be particularly heroic in tone. Nevertheless, Ignatius's schema can have the positive effect of enlarging a woman's desire beyond the constraints of conventional femininity-of intimacy-of inviting her to dream a larger reality for herself (Ruffing 2000: 24).

Ruffing (2000) maintains that directors need to be sensitive to the possibility that some women's desires may be differently expressed or timed than is expected in the sequence of desires outlined by Ignatius and that there needs to be freedom to make room for the way in which desire unfolds in the individual woman. One of the women

(Int. 4) said that her director moved her directly from the Principle and Foundation Exercises into the material of the Second Week and that the First Week issues emerged within the Third Week of the Exercises. This raises questions about the tension between fidelity to the Ignatian process as given in the text of the Exercises and fidelity to the unfolding process in this particular exercitant.

Given the context in which women are often estranged from their desires, and the possibility of gendered differences in desire, it may also be important not to impose the particular sequence of desires Ignatius outlines but rather to allow deep and authentic desires to emerge out of the woman's own experience of prayer, even if this means that the dynamic unfolds somewhat differently to the classic, possibly masculine dynamic outlined in the text. I would suggest that this is in fact profoundly Ignatian in the sense that Ignatius always emphasized the crucial importance of giving spiritual exercises in the way most profitable for the person's growth in relationship with God. Fr Hans Kolvenbach, formerly General of the Society of Jesus (1983-2008) advocates the importance of applying the Exercises in accordance with the deep desires elicited in the exercitant in the process of making them,

The actor Ignatius frees his experience to a thousand adaptations and interpretations. The one who gives the Exercises and the one who receives them-that is, both the one who intently probes the Ignatian experience of the other and the one who spontaneously tells the other what he is living in this experience-are in a relation in which it is always possible to find other ways in the search for the will of God. The two are not fixed and frozen in this experience as long as the one who gives the Spiritual Exercises, among all the ways of proceeding, has the boldness to choose according to how the interplay of desire develops in the experience of the one who wants to receive the Exercises (Kolvenbach 2002: 7).

## **7.7 DISCERNMENT**

Discernment is also about distinguishing among different voices and coming to sense which voice is that of the Holy Spirit. Discernment is integrally connected with desire because it is in and through our deepest desires that we may discover the will of God for our lives. Rahner claims that in the Exercises Ignatius believes that God may directly make God's will for the exercitant known to him or her (Rahner 1964: 94).

Rahner further argues that the Rules for Discernment of Spirits are for the purpose of helping this particular exercitant to discover God's will in his or her particular situation and that their use goes beyond discerning in a generic sense what God might want in a particular situation. He writes that the rules are

entirely constructed to distinguish from all other impulses those which are not merely promptings from God towards a decision the correctness and conformity of which to God's will has already been established on other grounds (Rahner 1964: 95).

Rahner emphasises that the person is "interiorly moved by the Spirit of God" (Rahner 1969: 97). His description gives a strong sense of a dialogical encounter in which the person is seeking God's will and God is revealing it through the interior movements of the person's heart. God is not constrained by our rational sense of what God "should" want in a particular situation.

It has to be taken to be a reality different from the human being and his own impulses and yet something that is operative as a psychological movement occurring in consciousness even though it takes its origin outside the consciousness (Rahner 1964: 100).

Rahner proposes that the Exercises are a means by which the will of God for this particular person in this particular circumstance may be discovered and that this is more than the simple application of general theological or ethical principles. They are, in his view, "the only systematic method of discovering this individual will of God" (Rahner 1964: 115).

If one attends calmly and objectively and tries to learn from Ignatius, without claiming to know beforehand what one is permitted to say, one cannot but come to the conclusion that in the Exercises Ignatius candidly assumes that a man has to reckon as a practical possibility of experience that God may communicate his will to him, and that this is not necessarily what one could have known by applying general maxims of faith and reason (Rahner 1964: 94).

Rahner proposes that God is in relationship with this particular person and revealing through that relationship God's will or desire for this particular person as distinct from any other person.

Suppressed inner voices or dormant “I-positions” need to be allowed a voice. If this is not the case, a discernment may be made from the standpoint of a dominant “I-position” only. In order to be able to discern well it is vitally important that the voices which developed defensively and which may be strongest do not dominate. The only way this can happen is when through the experience of being unconditionally loved the need for those defensive mechanisms lessens.

Discernment is strongly linked with the “election”. Purists claim that every experience of the Exercises if it is to be authentically Ignatian, must have an election in the form of a decision regarding a state of life or choice of mission or at the very least a specific decision regarding reform of life. Michael Holman, current Provincial of the Society of Jesus in the United Kingdom, suggests that even eight-day retreats require an election if they are to be authentically Ignatian (Holman: 2006)<sup>101</sup>. On the basis of the research I argue that the issue of election in the experience of lay women is perhaps more complex. One way of accounting for the lack of a clear election or decision may be that many of these women made the retreat in what Veltri terms a Healing Mode as opposed to a Call Mode (Veltri 1998: 325). However this does not explain the experience of those who entered the Exercises with a more positive image of God and self and for whom the movement was one of deepening relationship. For almost all the women interviewed, “election” did not involve making a specific decision, but was rather the gradual discovery of a more authentic way of living their Christian vocation.

Election for all but two of the women interviewed was not so much a choice which can easily be seen in the world - a choice of mission or ministry. There is less emphasis on what I am being called to live, as on how I am being called to live. There is a sense of an interior shift in how the woman experiences God and herself and a desire to live out of that experience. Many of the women note a shift from an emphasis on doing, which came out of the desire to please others or meet their expectations, to an experience of a call to BE. This was particularly marked in the case of the two women who experienced a shift from a masculine image of God to a feminine image of God. They seem to have linked their masculine image of God with

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<sup>101</sup> Conversation with Michael Holman 05 July 2006. Kwa-Zulu Natal. South Africa.

a benevolent, but nonetheless demanding God whose love needed to be earned either by achievement or by always putting the needs of others first. As their image of God shifted to a feminine image that sense of needing to earn love appears to have shifted. One can observe a similar dynamic in other women interviewed whose image of God remained masculine. One older woman who had worked hard all her life in a high pressure, male-dominated environment had felt the need to wear a mask of efficiency and assertiveness. In the process of the Exercises she discovered that she could relax, let go and be herself because she experienced herself as accepted and supported by God. Although she experienced this new freedom more markedly in her home and social setting than in her work environment, there was a sense for her that she could begin to “be” herself again and for her this shift seems to have been a kind of election.

Herbert Alphonso in his book *The Personal Vocation: Transformation in Depth through the Spiritual Exercises*, does not talk about the election in terms of making a decision. Rather he conceives it as “a becoming aware in growing inner freedom of God’s personal design or plan for me, so that I can accept it profoundly in my life to live it out faithfully and radically” (Alphonso 1990: 20). He emphasises that one’s personal vocation is “not on the level of doing or of function but on the level of being” (Alphonso 1990: 42).

It is no secret that availability for mission is one of the distinctive marks of a genuine apostolic spirituality. If my “meaning” in life does indeed lie on the level of “being”, far deeper and more radical than on the plane of “doing” where I function, then I can find profound meaning in anything that is entrusted to me as mission (Alphonso 1990: 43).

Perhaps in listening to the experience of women in the Exercises there is a need to expand our classical, more narrow understanding of election to include this kind of profound interior shift in how one chooses to live which comes out of the freedom that the growing relationship with Christ makes possible.

The freedom for authentic discernment requires, among other things:

Movement away from facades from a pretended self that we are not.  
Movement away from inner “shoulds” that originate from some idealised sense of what we must be to be acceptable, loveable and worthwhile.

Movement away from conformity for the sake of acceptance; movement away from a compulsive need to please others that robs us of freedom (Au and Au 2006: 10).

The mission idea of “election” which is so strong in the classical understanding of the Exercises is potentially highly problematic for women if they are in a space of doing in order to make reparation for not being enough (cf. Int. 2), or if they are “doing” out of a need to earn acceptance, approval or love whether of others or of God. Some women (cf Int. 2, 4, 5, 7) found that God’s invitation in the Exercises was to BE rather than to do which served as a powerful corrective to their sense that their value was dependent on their service.

## **7.8 GOSPEL CONTEMPLATION AND THE ROLE OF THE IMAGINATION**

In the previous chapter we discussed the significance of imaginal dialogue for the psychological development of the self. We noted how Gospel Contemplation provides an alternative imaginal landscape in which different “I” positions can be taken and the self expanded.

From a theological perspective as the exercitant begins to pray imaginatively, he/she enters into dialogue not just with themselves, or even with different parts of themselves, but with God - an Other who actively engages the person and reveals God’s self through the person’s imagination. Beyond the natural effects of imaginal dialogue Ignatius expects that imaginative contemplation will help the exercitant to encounter the God who exists objectively and who seeks to communicate God’s self to the exercitant. Marsh (2004) argues that we often hold back in prayer from actually opening ourselves to engage with God. We may talk to our idea of God and imagine what God might say in response to us. If we do this we remain on the level of imaginal dialogue and not of dialogue with an Other-God - whose moods, needs, desires, and feelings might surprise us. When we bring the insights of theology to bear on this process, we are looking not just at an internal imaginal process, which in itself could be powerful, but at one which we believe goes far beyond that and engages an actual “other” through the process of our imagination. We limit the transformative

capacity of engagement in that relationship when we do not make the space for the other (God) to engage us, but instead merely attempt to take on the role of the other through our imagination.

In a key article entitled, *Looking at God looking at you*, Marsh (2004) moves us beyond the level of what dialogical-self theorists would call the “private audience”. Marsh takes the notion of an awareness of being looked at by God into a much broader understanding of the transformative power of the actual relationship which is implied in that experience of being seen. He argues that most prayer stays on the level of what he terms “mind-blindness”.

We tend to be mind-blind about God. We think that God knows simply what we know, sees simply what we see, and consequently we rarely stop to ask God what God actually sees or knows or feels. We find it hard to let God enter our prayer as a real living person. Instead we misuse the name “God” to denote a projection of what we think and feel (Marsh 2004: 20).

Marsh claims that very often prayer consists of the person focusing on his or her needs, desires, feelings and of an almost egocentric speech; an internal rehearsal of experience which he says tends to “swing between two modes of speech, either I talk to myself or I talk to my idea of God” (Marsh 2004: 21). There is little real sense that God is another, separate, person who desires to communicate with me.

Barry and Ann Ulanov also argue that coming to a place of dialogical relationship in prayer is a process. “We come to God at first through the way we need God to be. Only slowly and with much experience of prayer can we allow God to come to us” (Ulanov and Ulanov 1982: 29).

We confide our most private, our most guarded, our most secret wishes and fears and wait to hear, to learn, and to perceive the response that will come back to us. Our images of God began this process of confiding. But the open-endedness of the conversation that follows soon goes far past those images and causes them to fade, even to break away completely (Ulanov and Ulanov 1982: 29).

In a subsequent article published in *The Way* entitled *Id Quod Volo: The Erotic Grace of the Second Week*, Marsh (2006) emphasizes the relational nature of the process of the Spiritual Exercises. He states that the language used in the opening meditation of

the Spiritual Exercises, the Principle and Foundation, is monological. In this meditation the exercitant is thinking about the purpose of his or her life; the Contemplation to attain Divine Love on the other hand which comes at the end of the Spiritual Exercises is thoroughly dialogical. (It is even presented dialogically as with reflection followed by response.) “In the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love<sup>102</sup> “we are talking to *someone else*, to God, to Christ. We are opening our hearts with a shocking intimacy” (Marsh 2006: 7-8). How has this profound shift happened? How do we come not just to know about Jesus but to know Jesus? It is through the sustained daily engagement with the person of Jesus through imaginative immersion in the Gospel encounters.

We come to know something of the mystery of who God is through coming to a deeper knowing of the person of Jesus. As Rahner asserts Jesus Christ is the historical event in which God turns irreversibly to us in self-communication (Rahner 1970: 62-65). Theologically we believe that through scripture God continues to reveal God’s self to us and that we are able to encounter Christ who exists beyond the constraints of historical time and place.

The women in the study spoke about the significance of their imaginative contemplations in coming to know the person of Jesus and shifting their image of him. At times there was a sense of the completely unexpected as when Jesus became a woman in the contemplation on Martha and Mary (Int. 4), the encounter with a playful Jesus in the desert (Int. 2) or Mary inviting the exercitant to hold the body of Jesus (Int. 1). The grace asked for at the beginning of the Second Week is that of coming to know, love and follow Jesus. There is also the sense of growing into the likeness of Christ through coming to an intimate knowledge of him as revealed through scripture. For some it was the realisation the Jesus was truly human which began with imagining Jesus as a baby in the contemplation on the Nativity.

The reflecting takes place through our *action*; the gospel story is not just a story about the Trinity and Mary, but also a drama in which we take part, in our prayer experience and in the subsequent ordering of our lives (Endean 2001b: 243).

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<sup>102</sup> Sometimes referred to as The Contemplatio.

According to Ruffing and Moser, the role of the imagination in prayer is critical to the process for women. If the director is able to support and honour the process of the women's own imaginative prayer without being prescriptive, "Women's own psyches and spirits will evolve the imagery they need in order to encounter the mystery contemplated in harmony with their feminine experience and psyches" (Ruffing and Moser 1992: 97).

This was very striking in the experience of the woman whose prayer on *The Two Standards* (Sp. Exx: 136-147) used the imagery of the two opposing armies presented in the meditation (Int. 4). In her prayer it was the experience of going into the centre of God and the union experienced there, which enabled the army of Christ to gain ground in the battle. What starts out as masculine imagery of the battle ground is transformed into a feminine image of containment.

If flawed images of God constrict our freedom and dampen our embrace of life, new images which ground hope and support transcendence can emerge from the imagination once...(we) surrender to the mystery of God (Au and Au 2006: 109).

Identification with a key person in the scripture passage was powerful for many of the women in the study. The young Sotho woman in the case study found allies and mentors in the persons of Mary and Elizabeth and later, in the Fourth Week of the Exercises, with Mary Magdalene. Their voices became counter-voices to the voices of her family and community and strengthened her own sense of the delicate emerging voice of her own desires.

Au and Au suggest that in a similar way to dream work, imaginative contemplation can help us to reconnect with parts of ourselves which we have repressed from our conscious awareness.

In Ignatian Contemplation we can be surprised by the sudden emergence of repressed aspects of ourselves demanding attention (Au and Au 2006: 113).

Veltri (1998: 209-300) asserts that our imagination is connected more strongly to our affective experiences and that the deeper layers of self are reached through metaphor,

image and symbols which come from the imagination which connects with those deeper layers of self. Imaginative contemplation seems to enable latent, or unconscious aspects of the self, to emerge as with the woman in her forties who was surprised by the way in which Jesus took on a female form in her contemplation of the passage of Mary and Martha (Int. 4).

Veltri (1998: 301) emphasises that people are able to access imagination in different ways. For some visual images prove elusive but the auditory or kinaesthetic imagination are equally effective means of connecting with an experience. This was evident for several of the women interviewed who struggled to enter into Gospel Contemplation in a predominantly visual way. However, where the director was able to suggest alternatives they found other ways through which they could use the imagination. These included letter writing and the use of pictures or images as a starting point. For one woman the colloquy which arose out of her lectio became an imaginative dialogue.

## **7.9 THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR**

The director seems to serve an anchoring function. Ignatius speaks about the role of the director in the Annotations-as acting at a balance and allowing the Creator to deal with the Creature.

Kolvenbach addresses this issue:

In Annotation 15, the distinction is clearly made between giving spiritual counsel, spiritual accompaniment and spiritual direction “outside of the Spiritual Exercises” and “during the spiritual Exercises.” The distinction depends on the meaning of the verb “move.” Outside of the Exercises, one can or should “move,” draw someone to make an election-to choose-a consecrated life, a lay mission, or the priesthood. During the Spiritual Exercises, “one should not move”-one should not urge the exercitant, because the search here is for the will of God. It must be God who disposes the heart of the exercitant to serve God in the way that God wishes to be served, pursuant to the admirable exchange between the exercitant who sets himself on the way where he can better serve his (her) Lord in the future, and the God who communicates Himself to the faithful

exercitant, embracing him-enflaming him-in love and praise. (Kolvenbach 2002: 2).

Almost all the women interviewed emphasised the significance of the role of the director in the process. Among the women interviewed five had (male) Jesuit directors and the other women all had lay female directors. Interestingly there is no marked difference in the reported experience of those women who had male directors and those who had female directors. The exception to this was one woman who was directed by a Jesuit whose approach she described as extremely non-directive. “Being directed didn’t seem to...how can I put it...the director didn’t seem to make much difference” (Int.13). She was not unhappy with her experience of direction. She said in talking about her experience of Gospel Contemplation, “It was from the head first. I had a man directing me. There was no touchy feely stuff.” Interestingly however she described no change in her image of self and limited change in her image of God in comparison with the other women interviewed.

Ignatius was giving the Exercises in a context in which they were being used to help exercitants to come to a decision about the choice of a state of life. In this context it makes sense that Ignatius’s primary concern is that the director not become a hindrance to that process by imposing his or her own preferences. In the context in which the Exercises are being given in South Africa perhaps we need to consider other aspects of the role of the director. What seems evident throughout the interviews is that the women see the director as having an important role in helping them to trust the new images of God which emerge in the process of their making the Exercises. The affirmation and validation of the exercitant’s experience is reported by almost all the women to be highly significant. It is as if culturally, and in relation to their experience of church, the women experienced only certain images and experiences of God as being legitimate. For example two of the women (Int. 5 and D. Int. 4) who spoke of their directors exposing them to images which included feminine images of God, felt that this gave them “permission” to engage with this image of God to which they had felt drawn. They express the importance of the director’s active encouragement of the process that is unfolding within them. While this could be interpreted negatively as poor spiritual direction- not “allowing the Creator to deal

with the Creature” (Sp: Exx: 2), in the Annotations Ignatius also advises the director to urge the person to act against his or her own inordinate attachments and areas of unfreedom.

Hence, that the Creator and Lord may work with greater certainty in His Creature, if the soul chance to be inordinately attached or inclined to anything, it is very proper that it rouse itself by the exertion of all its powers to desire that opposite of that to which it is wrongly attached (Sp.Exx.: 16).

Attachments to pleasing others or to winning approval through performance, typical in the women’s descriptions of themselves prior to making the Exercises, are also areas of unfreedom and inordinate attachment, which are more insidious because of their cultural validation. While the focus remains on God and the exercitant it appears helpful to women in that process to hear their director affirm strongly the new freedom which emerges in the process of the prayer.

## **7.10 CONCLUSION**

The Exercises are profoundly relational, taking place within the context of the ongoing dialogue between God and humankind. Its whole approach is also profoundly dialogical with imaginative dialogue as the predominant method of prayer both in the Gospel Contemplations and the colloquies. Rahner’s theology of grace (1960, 1964) is extremely helpful for understanding the way in which women experience shifts in image of God and image of self in the Exercises. His theology of grace demonstrates a profoundly relational understanding whereby God communicates God’s self to the person in and through his or her human experience. The Exercises provide a context in which the person can respond to the desire they experience to encounter God (which is itself God’s gift) by opening themselves more intentionally and consciously to receive that gift. While God tends to work predominantly through natural processes including imaginal dialogue, God is not limited by these. The research shows that the Exercises facilitate the discarding of unhelpful operative images of God and the development of more helpful ones. As the woman engaged with God in prayer in a sustained and intensive manner, her relationship with God tended to move towards greater intimacy. The experience of self in the gaze of God or Jesus generates a shift

in the way the woman experiences herself. This creates an experience of being loved for who she is, enabling decisions to be made, not out of an inordinate attachment to the approval of others and a sense of "not-being enough" but out of an experience of herself as loved and valued for herself.

# CHAPTER EIGHT - DIALOGUING THE TWO PERSPECTIVES

## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous two chapters looked at the results of the interviews first from the perspective of the psychological and then the theological. In this chapter I wish to engage with the question of how we interpret the relationship between the psychological and spiritual processes in understanding the shifts in image of God and image of self reported by women making the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius according to the 19th Annotation.

This thesis explores reported shifts in image of God and self both from a spiritual/theological perspective and from a psychological one. As psychology developed as a distinct discipline in its own right there tended to be a marked separation between the study of the psychological and the spiritual (although in recent years a greater interface has developed).<sup>103</sup> The world of Ignatius was however one in which psychology had not emerged as a separate discipline and in which “both the spiritual and psychological realms were understood as belonging to one and the same care of souls” (Veltri 1998: 330). As discussed in the chapter on Methodology (chapter four), the study of human experience is both psychological and theological with each discipline able to contribute to and enrich our understanding of human development.

The central point is that theology is always anthropology. A statement about God’s revelation is also a statement about the fickle, changeable creatures who receive that revelation (Endean 2001b: 66).

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<sup>103</sup> This was evident at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Dialogical Self at Cambridge 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> August 2009 which I attended. The seminar on Dialogism and Religion was very well-attended which attests to this development.

This statement could be said to apply with equal validity to psychology. Douglas Hardy (2003) claims that work of psychologists who study religious experience such as that of Winnicott (1971) and Rizzuto (1979) contain implicit theologies (even if they themselves are at pains to deny that their work is in any way theological) and argues that:

Implicit theologies in psychologies can aid in theologizing by offering interpretive approaches that mediate between the secularizing tendency of those who would reduce religious experience to nothing but natural processes, and the spiritualizing tendency of those who would reduce religious experience to nothing but supernatural processes. Non-radically reductive psychologies of religion like James's and Winnicott's allow for phenomena to be both natural and religious, i.e. capable of being "authentic religious experience" and explainable in terms of naturalistic theories of religion (Hardy 2003: 368).

Eolene Boyd-McMillan (2004) points to a critical issue in the interdisciplinary study of psychology and theology. She asserts that psychological approaches have historically not tended to take seriously even the possibility of divine agency and its impact on human development, whereas current writers from theological backgrounds are often ready to engage with psychological understandings or explanations of spiritual processes, often to the extent that they underplay or neglect totally the spiritual factors which are academically inadmissible in many psychological circles.

It has become common to claim that "psychology reveals much about the Spiritual Exercises". But the insights should not flow only in one direction. Not only those who live and pray out of the Ignatian Exercises, but also psychologists interested in psychic transformation, can benefit from understanding divine grace in interdisciplinary terms. Psychology as a discipline might not want categorically to affirm divine gracious initiative and relational desire. Yet if it remains open to the possibility of divine agency having reportable effects in the human psyche, psychology will be better able to describe and explain Christian Spiritual Transformation (Boyd-MacMillan 2004: 39).

She proposes that the process of the Exercises is transformative on the level of relationship: “the person is given a new nature in relationality with God” (Boyd-MacMillan 2004: 29).

We will only develop a proper psychology of the Exercises if we recognise that the spiritual freedom and transformation they promote presuppose a mutual relational commitment between the self and God. God acts in the human heart. Any psychology articulated simply in terms of the self’s development is liable to obscure and distort that central reality (Boyd-MacMillan 2004: 29).

## **8.2 THE SHIFT TOWARDS RECOGNISING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RELATIONAL**

The disciplines of psychology and theology are both placing increasing emphasis on the relational. In theology, the first dimension of this was the “turn to the subject”, taking seriously personal experience, and is also shown in theologies of the Trinity and of the church which emphasise communion and relationship. Both object-relations and dialogical psychology see relationship as key to the development and on-going construction of identity. Identity develops within the context of human relationships. Meissner (1987) points to a parallel between the way psychology (for example Freud’s early thinking) and theology have shown a movement toward an increasing appreciation of the importance of relationship.

Psychologically, both object-relations and dialogical psychology see relationship as key to the development and on-going construction of identity, maintaining that identity develops within the context of human relationships. Theologically, our identity develops within the context of the relationship with God. Our current understanding of grace has moved from the ontological to the relational in which grace is understood as God’s on-going self-communication through our experience. God works in and through the natural world using it to draw humankind to God’s self. The natural faculties of intellect, emotion and imagination are all means through which God can reveal God’s self to the person. Mechanisms of growth in the Spiritual Exercises are both psychological and spiritual.

### 8.3 GRACE BUILDS ON NATURE

In an article entitled *The Ignatian Paradox*, William Meissner (2003) a psychiatrist and one of the major contributors in the area of Ignatian Spirituality and psychodynamic theory, discusses the interplay of divine and human action. If we begin with the theological principle that grace builds on nature, Meissner argues that it is our natural capacity for relationship which is built upon and enhanced through grace and it is therefore helpful from a theological perspective to better understand the natural human capacity for object-relations. Meissner (1987) argues that object-relations theory is the most obvious natural theoretical approach by which we might begin to try to understand these relational implications. At the same time he acknowledges that object-relations theory is necessarily limited in the degree to which it can help us in understanding the person's relationship with God. Other authors in the field such as McDargh (1999) and Hardy (2000) also assert the value of object-relations theories such as that of Donald Winnicott (1965, 1971) as helpful dialogue partners for theology in the common endeavor of "articulating a foundational understanding of the human that both spirituality and psychology might recognize and affirm" (McDargh 1994: 7).

Meissner (2003) suggests that psychoanalysis and the psychology of the Spiritual Exercises share a common goal which is "the enhancement of freedom and of the capacity for free choice" (Meissner 2003: 34) He stresses the Thomistic principle of *gratia perficit naturum* (Meissner 2003: 42). Grace works in and through our natural human capacities, perfecting them. He argues that Ignatius would be interested not in whether "grace *or* nature is effective in the production of spiritual effects, but rather how such effects result from the combination of grace and nature" (Meissner 2003: 43).

Rahner's theologies of grace and mysticism are unashamedly dependent on Revelation. Nevertheless grace builds on nature. Though an adequate Christian theology can never reduce to a philosophy, it does require one. If theological claims about uncreated grace and the immediate experience of God are to be credible, they need somehow to connect with a philosophical account of knowledge and experience (Endean 2001b: 50).

Rahner states that,

The reflective activity we call theology and the emotional and relational process we call spiritual growth, are two aspects of one fundamental reality: the growth of the whole human person towards God (Rahner 2004: 28).

His understanding of spiritual growth includes the psychological growth of the human person. For Rahner there is only one thing happening: God's self-communication to the human person and so in Rahner's understanding the worlds of spirituality and psychology are not contradictory but interwoven. Meissner describes the current theological perspectives on grace which emerged from Rahner's work as fundamentally relational. Grace is "the divine self-communication to man in a loving relationship, resulting in the divine presence and divine indwelling within the soul" (Meissner 1987: 28). He argues that this understanding of grace emphasizes "the interpersonal dimensions, the gratuitous self-communication and presence of the triune God within the soul elevated by grace" (Meissner 1987: 21).

Rahner believes that all of humanity is created with the innate desire for God and that it is God's desire that all humanity be redeemed. The desire that we hear expressed by the women interviewed and which draws them into the experience of the Exercises is a desire which arises from uncreated grace: God's indwelling presence within each human person.

Moreover, this is no mere passive ability to receive grace; it is an active seeking and desiring. But in the light of the supernatural existential, this dynamism appears to be much more than a dynamism of nature; this desire and need is itself a gift, and although not of itself 'saving grace,' still a supernatural grace (Haight 1979: 125).

God communicates God's self in and through our natural human faculties: our feelings, intellect, imagination and will, which is why Ignatius is at pains to insist that the exercitant engage all those faculties. At the same time God is not limited by them and will at times communicate in ways which are surprising and which cannot be explained by psychological means alone. This is a key paradox in the Ignatian Exercises. The exercitant is to use all natural means to open him or herself to grace,

recognizing that God has created not only grace but also nature. And yet, God's action is not limited by our natural capacities but at times seems to take us beyond them. Cusson reminds us that "the Exercises simultaneously count wholly on personal effort and wholly on the action of grace" (Cusson 1988: 110).

Ignatius calls for all the personal effort which the exercitant can furnish; yet in reality he counts only on God's grace, the source of every ordered activity and of all goodness in creatures (Cusson 1988: 111).

Meissner quotes Ignatius's words in the Constitutions with regard to pastoral training which would also apply in the giving of the Exercises:

Although all this can be taught only by the unction of the Holy Spirit and by the prudence which God our Lord communicates to those who trust in his Divine Majesty, nevertheless the way can at least be opened by some suggestions which aid and dispose one for the effect which must be produced by divine grace. (Ignatius in Meissner 2004: 33).

Rahner speaks of the "supernatural existential" which means that the person is orientated to God from the first moment of their existence. Thus Rahner would say there is no "pure nature" distinct from grace. God works primarily in and through our ordinary experience. Therefore it makes sense that our relationship with God builds first on our early relationships with significant others. At the same time our desire for and orientation towards others in relationship may be an expression of our longing for God.

The grace of God may be amazing grace, transcending our expectations, but it nevertheless builds on, rather than abolishes, nature and the transcendence already given therein (Endean 2001b: 16).

If we consider the text of the Exercises, and in particular the annotations and additions, it would seem that Ignatius generally believes God acts in and through nature, that is, human experience. Ignatius does not address the spiritual apart from the emotional or the physical. He is convinced that God works in and through the whole person and that each natural faculty may become more orientated towards God. Although Ignatius does not talk explicitly or theoretically about the psychological, he

clearly uses what we would now recognise as psychological means to assist the exercitant to open herself more fully to God.

Ignatius gives very detailed attention to such apparently “non-spiritual” matters as using practical, physical means to create the appropriate psychological atmosphere for each “Week” of the Exercises. For example, he suggests that the exercitant keep their room in darkness during the meditations of the First Week. “For the same reason I should deprive myself of all light, closing the shutters and doors when I am in my room, except when I need light to say prayers, to read, or to eat” (Sp. Exx: 79). He gives detailed instructions as to how the exercitant is to prepare him or herself for prayer by very specific acts: a preparatory prayer, praying for (articulating) the grace we desire, imagining the place. These aspects demand a good deal of effort and active engagement on the part of the exercitant. I would argue that in that process the exercitant, by actively engaging his or her God-representation on the level of intellect, imagination and affect, opens it to change. Ignatius in particular harnesses the power of “imaginal dialogue” and “possible selves”<sup>104</sup> as ways of eliciting a generous response on the exercitant’s part and a deepening of relationship between the exercitant and God.

Ignatius seems to know the power of natural means to open the person to a deeper experience of a particular grace and he encourages the director to assist the directee by insisting on using these natural means, particularly when exercitant seems not to be making progress in the Exercises. The importance of natural means was evident in the experiences reported by the women interviewed. Basic things such as the need to spend enough time in prayer; the accountability created by having to report on one’s prayer experience to the director, times away in solitude in the course of the process were all seen as very important to creating the space in which an encounter with God could take place.

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<sup>104</sup> These concepts connected with a Dialogical Understanding of the self were presented in Chapter Three.

In 1974, Rahner named an important methodological principle for the interpretation of the Exercises.

A commentary in the text of the Exercises must be equally concerned with the substantive assertion and the practical instructions. The two condition each other. There are not merely psychological issues lurking behind the seemingly how-to-do-it psychological instructions in the text. Rather, these latter often imply a whole theology, and therefore to comment on them is *also* a genuinely theological task (Rahner in Endean 2001b: 242).

However, Ignatius in his description of consolation without previous cause, also leaves open the possibility for God's intervention and self-communication which is not confined to natural processes but goes beyond them. It would certainly appear from the research in this thesis that God can break through our long-held God images in ways which are difficult to account for solely on a psychological level. Rahner quotes Ignatius's view that,

In the bizarre, but true faith that the true and authentic spirit of God is able and willing to give a directive to the individual conscious creature, despite his or her narrowness and the hundredfold ways in which he or she is materially and mentally conditioned - a directive that cannot be attained by any rational or depth-consideration on its own (Endean 2001b: 36).

For example, the young woman whose image of Jesus was of the Jesus of the passion helpless on the cross, encountered a playful, relaxed and nurturing Jesus in the desert in her experience of Gospel Contemplation. There is a striking discontinuity between her prior experience of God and this new experience which was experienced by her not only a turning point for her in the retreat, but in her relationship with God. The woman whose dominant pre-Exercises image of God was that of a man brandishing a sjambok, shifted to that of a providing God who desires her happiness. Psychologically speaking it seems nearly impossible to account for such a radical shift in image of God over a period of only a few months. Even in clients undergoing intensive analysis profound changes in the psyche and in self-image may take years.

Theologically however we can understand it as God's self-communication to the person which is not limited to natural psychological processes.

From a merely natural perspective our understanding of the capacity to relate to God as an object is limited by our understanding of our capacity to relate to other human beings as objects. But from a supernatural perspective, the capacity to enter into a divine relationship must be given as a special gift out of God's loving initiative (Meissner 1987: 28).

While there is a sense in which the Exercises open the person on a natural level to receive that grace, the self-communication of God (which is uncreated grace) is God's gratuitous gift and cannot be forced. In his Rules for Discernment more appropriate to the Second Week, Ignatius speaks about times when the experience of God is so unexpected and intense that there can be no doubt that what has taken place is the direct action of God on the soul.

God alone can give consolation to the soul without any preceding cause. It belongs solely to the Creator to come into a soul, to leave it, to act upon it, to draw it wholly to the love of the Divine Majesty. I said without any previous cause, that is, without any preceding perception or knowledge of any subject by which a soul might be led to such a consolation through its own acts of intellect and will (Sp. Exx: 330).

Egan commenting on this rule writes that consolation without previous cause,

is initiated and arises from within the very core, the exercitant's fine point of his spirit, his deepest freedom and mystery, his sacred center. Exercising his rights as Creator, God enters the soul from the inside, without violence, and without being a stranger to this most intimate sphere. He takes full possession of the exercitant by opening his spiritual core in such a way that its deepest centre comes expressly and thematically into play (Egan 1976: 39).

Some of the women interviewed shared experiences which they themselves could not doubt as being from God. One woman declined to share the content of her two final mystical experiences, describing them as too intimate. However she described these experiences as being of a depth and intensity that was qualitatively different from the rest of her retreat. She said:

Suddenly I was overwhelmed by the love of God. Something deep within me seemed to break and I cried as I have not cried in years. I felt his love and compassion so strongly that I almost felt as if liquid love was pouring over me. It was as if wave after wave of this incredible love just flowed over me. I cannot explain the feeling in words but will always remember this pure, holy love (Int. 7).

The intensity of this experience was beyond anything she anticipated possible. While she had opened herself to God through daily imaginative prayer and colloquy, and had experienced a shift in her relationship with God throughout the process, this experience was overwhelmingly different. It seems it was an experience of consolation without preceding cause.

Lonergan argues that,

Our questions for intelligence, for reflection and for deliberation, constitute our capacity for self-transcendence. That capacity becomes and actuality when one falls in love. Then one's being becomes being-in-love. Such being-in-love has its antecedents, its causes, its conditions, its occasions. But once it has blossomed forth and as long as it lasts, it takes over. It is the first principle. ....This fulfillment is not the product of our knowledge or choice. On the contrary, it dismantles and abolishes the horizon in which our loving and choosing went on and it sets up a new horizon in which the love of God will transvalue our values and the eyes of that love will transform our knowing. (Lonergan 1972: 105).

It appears that while God works constantly in and through our natural experience, this seems to prepare the retreatant for an experience of God's love which is so profound that it is in some way discontinuous with our previous experience.

## **8.4 THE EFFECTS OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES**

The purpose of the Exercises is essentially a spiritual one-to help the exercitant to become free of all that hinders the deepening of his/her relationship with God. What is evident from the research is that the women interviewed reported not only an increased freedom on a spiritual level, but also on an emotional or psychological one. In the course of this thesis we have discussed the reported experiences of women making the Exercises both from a psychological and spiritual-theological perspective

and found that the overwhelming majority of women reported significant positive shifts in their image of God and self. All the women interviewed who reported significant shifts in their image of God and self expressed in some way the significance of the relational. The converse was also true. Where there was no shift reported in image of self (Int. 13) there was no mention of a relational shift. What emerged clearly was a strong correlation between shifts in image of God and image of self and a movement towards a more developed sense of relationship between the woman and her God.

How the interplay takes place between image of God, image of self and the development of a more engaged relationship is difficult to establish. Is it that a shift in image of God enables the development of a more intimate and significant relationship? Or is it in the development of the relationship that the woman's image of God changes? It seems probable that there is a dynamic interplay between the two. It may be that as the woman is exposed to different, more positive and intimate possible images of God, she feels drawn to engage more with one or more of those images. In that process, through grace God reveals something of God-self as unconditionally loving. In the experience of an unconditionally loving and accepting God the woman is able to relinquish to some degree the need to act in ways which elicit the approval or love of those around her as the need for defensive processes diminishes. As she comes to experience herself in that relationship as loved, or "beautiful" her image of self also tends to change in a positive direction.

## **8.5 THE SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IN GOSPEL CONTEMPLATION**

Ignatius understood how to use the imagination to enable the exercitant to both create and discover an experienced relationship with God. Most exercitants prior to making the Exercises had a desire to know God but their experience of God was largely limited to an abstract sense of what they had believed God to be like through their experience of parents or significant care-takers and some experience of church and catechesis. Prayer was not particularly relational because God for them had not

become enfleshed or personally known. Ignatius's desire is that the exercitant come to know Jesus personally and through that first-hand knowledge come to a deep love for him and a desire to follow or imitate him. The relationships which are significant in our lives and which help to shape and re-shape our identity are engaged in person and in interior dialogue on a regular basis. In order for the relationship with God/Jesus to become first significant and then primary there needs to be the same kind of engagement. Rizzuto's (1979) observation that the God-representation tends to be packed away, may be in large part because most people do not have a means of actively engaging it. Even if set prayers are said these do not provide an effective way for the person to engage dialogically with their God-representation or image of God. Ignatius provides a method which offers a powerful way into the relationship by means of a structured process of sustained dialogical engagement between the exercitant and Jesus.

On a psychological level, the exercitant is able to engage with a significant person in a new imaginal landscape. By allowing herself to enter into the story imaginatively using all her senses her identity and world-view are brought into dialogue with a different time, space and with characters who she would not normally encounter. By identifying with one or more of these characters in the story which may become different "I" positions, the different perspectives allow for the possibility of expanding the self to include other parts which might generally be dormant or underdeveloped. Added to this psychological dimension and working in and through it is the theological assumption that the Risen Christ continues to engage us and that we are able to encounter him through the words of scripture which remain an on-going source of revelation. It is not a passive engagement. The use of the imagination allows both receptivity to what is unconscious as well as an active bringing of our own conscious experience and story into engagement with the mystery to be contemplated.

The prayer may begin with the retreatant praying to her idea of God in an imaginal dialogue in which we take on the roles of ourself and the other we imagine God to be. But if as in the experience of one exercitant "my imagination becomes a doorway into a deeper relationship" (Int. 7), then the imagination is the space into which God can

break through and reveal more of God's-self. Marsh (2004) claims that part of the answer may be found in Ignatius's Third Addition (Sp. Exx: 75) in which he asks the exercitant to begin by becoming aware of God looking at him or her. This highlights the awareness of the exercitant that God is other than me and in relationship with me. How is it that for so many of the women interviewed the experiences which were most significant were the ones which were most unexpected and which addressed the person at the place of greatest vulnerability? Psychologically it may be the use of the imagination allows unconscious desires and images to come to the surface. Theologically one would argue that the person had a profound encounter with the living Christ. Whether that experience is a natural psychological process or a supernatural experience its effects are both psychologically freeing in allowing a lessening of defensive processes and spiritually freeing in removing obstacles to a deeper relationship with Christ.

## **8.6 MECHANISMS OF GROWTH IN THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES**

We have already examined in some depth the psychological and spiritual processes at work within the process of the Spiritual Exercises. I argue that the Exercises create a relational landscape or space within which spiritual and psychological development is facilitated through processes designed to enable the person to engage relationally with God and with their own inner objects. It is deliberate and sustained engagement with the imaginal which enables the relational and dialogical processes to take place. The Exercises engage the relational dimension at every level. Making the Exercises creates a unique space and method to engage the relationship between the person and his or her God-representation; the relationship between the person and God; the relationships between different aspects of the self (internal objects or I-positions) elicited in Gospel Contemplation and the relationship between the director and the directee.

Shifts in image of God and image of self seem to be strongly related to the imaginal and relational processes of the Spiritual Exercises. I argue that a sustained engagement in the Exercises engages the imaginal in particular ways which facilitate

the development of a personally significant and intimate relationship with God. Rizzuto claimed both that revision of the God-representation was important for psychic revision and growth but that revision of the God-representation tends not to occur unless a critical life event causes a person to revisit it (Rizzuto: 1979). The Exercises are a process whereby the God-representation is actively revisited and reengaged with by means of a sustained process of imaginal/dialogical prayer. As the God-representation is revised through that process this must have an impact on the other internal psychic structures and vice versa. It therefore makes sense that there cannot be significant change on the level of the God-representation without a correspondingly significant shift in the way the person sees him or herself.

Ulanov (2001: 22-24) claims that the space of the imagination is the bridge between our own “pet-Gods” which arise often from our unconscious and the traditional images which have come down to us through liturgy, scripture and doctrine. Somewhere in the gap a creative process is enabled by which our own deepest longings, fears and needs come into engagement with shared images of the tradition and something new comes into being that is distinctly our own unique relationship with God. Ulanov and Ulanov suggest that “the gaps between personal and official images for God may well be where the precious blood of life is to be found” (Ulanov and Ulanov 1991: 31) Both aspects are indispensable.

When we include both our subjective-object God-images and the objective-object ones, we enter an energetic space of contemplative action and active contemplation that grants us the illusion of finding as our own the self that has been given us and creating the giver we find behind it and in it. This makes for a lively scene, for we pray to a God we imagine, knowing all the while that our God-image betrays the presence of the God it points to - betrays it in the sense of covering it, masking it, distorting it, yet also in the sense of giving way to it, uncovering it, exposing us to its reality. (Ulanov 2001: 30)

In the Exercises process Ignatius enables this process of “the gap” to happen by encouraging the use of the physical senses and the imagination to connect with the story from Scripture. The imaginative process is so powerful partly because it allows us aspects to deeper levels of our psyche. “When images arise spontaneously from within us, they may be all the more startling because they issue from outside our

unknowing. They often come from our unknowing, our unconscious.” (Ulanov and Ulanov 1991: 4)

Ulanov believes that God who is mystery becomes real for us when we are able to be in this transitional space in which I partly create the God I find in my imagination but it is precisely in that space of connection between my fantasy and the tradition I am exposed to, that God who is bigger than either reveals something of God’s self to the person. “The space in between reveals itself as the space of meeting” (Ulanov 2001: 36).

Theologically significant experience just is that experience in which “transcendence becomes thematic”, in whatever way and to whatever degree: the moment when the self’s gracious reality is appropriated and realized –in both the cognitive and objective senses- anew. Through the experience one reinterprets tradition, and they learns to see oneself and the world in new ways-a process which may well lead to new forms of action (Endean 2001b: 249.)

Rahner, from a theological standpoint, is saying exactly the same thing. What enables the relationship with God to come alive within the person requires a meeting of tradition scripture and the subjective and personal experience of that revelation.

In claiming that divine revelation was always an event in human consciousness, Rahner established that any theology focusing only on the official Word would be in principle incomplete, and grounded a dynamic, generative view of tradition. God’s grace is always a free interaction between the external word and the indwelling divine presence. Teachings and exhortations are useless unless, they meet up with the ultimate grace from within (Endean 2001b: 40).

And so the whole process of Gospel Contemplation powerfully facilitates the development of a significant relationship.

When we hold images of people we love in our minds-the eyes of a long-time friend, the death of a parent, the fresh complexion of a daughter or son, the body of our Beloved, so vivid to us that a scent accompanies the image, we are creating and re-creating the love between us and the others...Imagination feeds reality (Ulanov and Ulanov 1991: 5).

In the previous two chapters we discussed the results of the study first from a psychological perspective and then from a theological perspective. I want to begin by briefly recapping each of those perspectives before moving on to look at the mechanisms or processes by which these shifts occur.

## **8.7 THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The dynamic of the relationship begins with desire. The woman experiences a strong desire for a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. This desire underpins the decision to make the Spiritual Exercises. Theologically we understand that desire itself as God's gift. Desire then carries the exercitant through the dynamic of the Exercises as the energy which moves the exercitant through the process. This desire is fundamentally relational. The relationship with Jesus is highlighted in the graces prayed for in the Second and Third and Fourth Weeks. In the Second Week, the Third Prelude is "to ask for what I desire." Here it will be to ask for an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who had become man for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely" (Sp. Exx: 104). In the Third Week it is "to ask for sorrow, compassion, and shame because the Lord is going to His suffering for my sins" (Sp. Exx: 193).

Particularly as the woman moves through the Exercises of the Second and Third Weeks there is often the experience that for the first time there is a recognition of the humanity of Jesus and a corresponding sense that this is someone who I can relate to and who is able to identify with my longings, fears and hopes. At times there are experiences in which something so surprising and significant happens that it is clear to the exercitant that she has encountered God who is other in the experience and not merely a creation of her own imagination. Typically there is a movement from a transcendent or ambivalent image of God to one which moves through the imaginative contemplation of the life of Jesus to an experience of God as immanent. As the woman engages with the person of Jesus and walks with him to his passion there is a further movement to intimacy. For many of the women it was the experience of being with Jesus in his passion which allowed the intimacy to deepen.

As a particular image of God emerged through the process of imaginative contemplation and “took flesh” for the woman other less helpful images could be discarded. In this process the woman’s experience of herself tended to shift to one in which she feels less anxious. There is a sense of being accepted and valued by the One who created her and who sustains her in being. This experience of being accepted and loved spills over into being able to accept and love others in her environment but not in a way that is destructive of self. The experience of praying, in particular with the Gospel encounters, allows engagement with different aspects of Jesus so that the woman’s experience of and image of him may be expanded and enriched. This takes root most powerfully when she actively engages with Jesus in different situations from the perspective of her own life and experience. The woman, whose experience of feeling that Jesus did not understand what it was like to be a woman and to do housework encountered Jesus as a woman who did indeed understand her experience.

Watkins says that, “As the imaginal other is granted its own animation and agency, it can surprise the imaginer with its words. The imaginal other can act upon the self as well as being acted upon” (Watkins 1986: 63). God who is not only imaginary but who theologians hold to have an objective reality acts upon the self in the imaginal dialogue which is entered into on a daily basis. Other protagonists in the Gospels however may also shape the person as they identify with them and desire a similar relationship with Jesus.

Psychologists and theologians may well be able to agree on some of the mechanisms by which these shifts occur. Psychologist and spiritual director Brendan Callaghan (2003: 29) argues that the use of imaginative prayer in the Exercises is a powerful mechanism by which the directee’s God-representation may be shifted. It is evident from the research that the God-representations of the women were expanded and changed through immersion in a dialogical process in which they engaged in an intensive and sustained way with their God-representation. There is more openness amongst many psychologists to the notion that the imagination is an essential part of what it means to be human and to be psychologically healthy. Winnicott (1971)

certainly argues the importance of the transitional space of play, of art, and of religion as being of vital importance to the psyche.

For theologians however, the imaginal relationship which the person enters into through imaginative prayer of different kinds enables the person to encounter at least to some extent God. God for them is not only a product of the imagination, but truly exists and who creates us at every moment and who uses both natural and supernatural means to communicate God's self to us.

The use of the Gospel texts for imaginative contemplation also has a different significance from a psychological and theological point of view. The method of imaginative dialogue which is present in Imaginative Contemplation and colloquy involves an active and sustained engagement by the person with her God-representation. From a psychological perspective of Dialogical self theory the use of a wide variety of stories with a range of characters provides an alternative imaginal landscape through which the person can explore a range of different "I-positions". In this process previously dormant or underdeveloped parts of the self are able to emerge. From a psychological perspective it would matter little if it were a different collection of texts. From a theological perspective the Gospel stories are the "Word of God," which is believed to be a living word in which we can encounter the same Jesus.

## **8.7 THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **8.7.1 Healing in the Transference**

The process of the Exercises also seemed to enable significant psychological shifts to take place. For some women unresolved issues and unmet needs were met in the transference relationship with God enabling healing of early childhood experiences. This may be seen as parallel to the psychoanalytic description of the healing power of a therapeutic transference. This especially involved a relational process which enabled

a lessening of defenses and an expansion of the self through renegotiation of inner objects of I-positions. When the exercitant starts to experience herself as valued unconditionally and to feel secure attachment the need for defenses lessens. Dominant and sometimes oppressive aspects of the self such as the need to please or perform diminish, and other previously rejected or underdeveloped parts of the self are allowed a space. Some women also reported an expanded sense of identity as previously dormant parts of themselves were allowed and integrated. This experience impacted significantly on the election of some women whose experience of being accepted, valued and loved unconditionally by the imaginal other, Jesus, were enabled to relax their sense of needing to earn love.

The Exercises provide a relational and imaginal space through the triangular relationship of God, exercitant and director in which attention is paid both to natural and to spiritual processes. It is fascinating that Ignatius knew nothing of object-relations theory or dialogical-self theory and yet the principles of psychological growth which they articulate may be seen clearly in the Exercises process. The therapeutic process used by therapists with an object-relations orientation emphasizes the transference. Old patterns of relating are unconsciously reenacted in the therapy relationship but the therapist provides a different experience from the original experience. The therapist tries as far as possible to remain unknown to the patient in order to facilitate the patient's projection onto the therapist of unresolved conflicts and issues in significant relationships. The analysis of the transference, ie the therapist's interpretation for the patient of what is taking place, allows for healing in the transference. The patient is able to have a different experience to that which he/she has come to expect.

Within the Spiritual Exercises a similar process takes place in the relationship with God or with Jesus. In a similar way to the transference in psychodynamic therapy, the relationship with God provides a new relational experience in which old ways of being and relating are engaged but in the light of this new relationship defenses are found to be unnecessary and so are able to be shed. Within the prayer experience of Gospel Contemplation the directee projects her issues and unresolved conflicts. When the response of Jesus is other than what she anticipated from negative past experiences

there may be an experience of deep healing. The exercitant engages in the relationship through imaginal dialogue on a daily basis and this provides the intensity needed for healing in the transference to take place.

### **8.7.2 Possible Selves from a Psychological and Spiritual Perspective**

As was discussed in chapter three, Baldwin and Holmes (1987) talk about possible selves as representing the selves the person sees that he/she aspires to become and those they wish to resist or avoid. The process of imaginative contemplation, (as well as some of the non-biblical meditations), highlights possible selves. Interestingly, perhaps surprisingly, the women said little about wanting to become like Jesus and little about wanting to become like those in the stories they prayed. Perhaps this was because it was implicit in their experience but their focus was more on the desire for a relationship with him than it was about imitating him. Where “possible selves” were most strongly evident were in the examples of women who wanted to emulate women in the scripture. Nthabiseng, the young woman described in the case study, found in Mary, Elizabeth and Mary Magdalene possible selves which impacted on her sense of what was possible for her if she emulated them in her own context. This is the case on the psychological level of seeing women behave in ways she desires to behave but had never seen as possible. On a spiritual level these women become significant mentors who she can ask for help in living out her vocation.

## **8.8 THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR**

Ignatius says “the director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creature to deal directly with the Creature, and the creature directly with his creator and Lord” (Annotation 15). It is important to remember that Ignatius generally took people into the Exercises long after he had begun to engage with them in spiritual conversation. In the initial stages of that relationship he was comfortable with taking on a more active role. It was at the point of decision-making or election within the Exercises that he was concerned that

the director's ideas and agenda should not get in the way of God's revealing of his hopes and desires for the exercitant.

At least in the early stages of the Exercises most of the directors seem to have been more engaged relationally and this seems to have been experienced by the women as helpful. It may be that in the early stages of the Exercises some of the women's God-representations were too undeveloped to enable them to engage relationally with God. The relationship with the director may have functioned as a kind of transitional space or experience. The relationship of trust experienced initially within the direction relationship may have been necessary in order for some of the women to feel safe enough to risk engaging in a relationship with a God who they felt distant from or had ambivalent feelings about. Once the relationship with God developed the director's role could be less active, allowing the Creator to deal with the Creature.

The presence of the director deserves attention. The initial process of entering into imaginal dialogical prayer can be unsettling. The women interviewed stressed the need for someone they trusted who could reassure them that what they were experiencing was valid and not merely something of their own creation. When what they were discovering challenged their previously held image of God or what they were taught about God as children, they needed, at least initially to have another voice that would ally itself with what God was revealing to them in the prayer.

Ignatius was aware that the process of entering more deeply into prayer is one which inevitably entails movements of the spirit which need to be discerned. The questioning of their own real experience of God in prayer is to be expected in times of desolation and is a space in which the reassurance and gentle encouragement of the director is critical. In fact the encouragement of the director in times of desolation is evident in his instructions to the director to be gentle and consoling when the exercitant encounters times of desolation.

For some of the women the issue of whether what they were experiencing in prayer was “allowed” was significant. At an early stage the director may offer an alternative “authority” who validates the experience until they are able to find that validation from the relationship itself. This was especially true where the prayer was surprising, eliciting anxieties about whether their experience was heretical or unorthodox. Each of the women who experienced God as female in their prayer was disconcerted by the experience. The woman described in the Case Study as Lisa was not able to speak to anyone about the dream she had had of Jesus as a woman on the cross. It was only when her director gave her prayer material from other women who had encountered God as Woman that she began to be able to claim her own experience. Similarly women who came from faith traditions or communities with very prescriptive ideas about God struggled to hold onto an experience of God in prayer which revealed something different. The woman from a Baptist church which preached a very punitive image of God and the dangers of hell, grappled with being unable to reconcile this with the God of love and mercy whom she encountered in her prayer in the Exercises. It raises the question as to why women doubt their own experience and whether this is more true of most women than most men.

## **8.9 CONCLUSION**

The Exercises tend to facilitate profound shifts in the God and self-representations of women. The mechanisms which generated those shifts were both psychological and spiritual. Both psychology and spirituality are recognizing the significance of the relational for human development. Object-relations theorists and Dialogical Self theorists emphasise the importance of relationship. Similarly our understanding of grace has moved from ontological to relational, recognizing that grace is God’s self-gift. Where grace and nature were once considered antithetical this is no longer the case. There is a recognition that grace works through nature and that the study of the human person in psychology should be to a large degree co-extensive with our theological understanding.

The imaginal is a powerful means of enabling the development of the relational and we are engaged naturally in imaginal dialogue with significant others. The Exercises with its emphasis on Imaginative Contemplation and colloquy capitalizes on the power of the imagination to develop relationship and provides the opportunity for intensive and sustained engagement with the person's God-representation. The God-representation or image shifts in this process as God communicates God-self to the person through the natural means of imagination, intellect and affect. The shift in the God-representation in turn impacts strongly on the exercitant's image of self. When the exercitant begins to experience herself as valued unconditionally the need for defenses lessens. Dominant and sometimes oppressive aspects of the self such as the need to please or perform diminish and other previously rejected or underdeveloped parts of the self are allowed a space. The spiritual direction sessions provide an additional space in which emerging and more helpful images of God can be affirmed. Both Rahner (2004) and Ulanov (2001) point to the necessity for both tradition (objective-God images) and personal experience (subjective God-images) and for the interaction between these, for the person to truly encounter God. The interaction between tradition in the form of scripture and the life-experience of the woman facilitates a shift in the exercitant's God-representation and the creation of new and more helpful images.

Rahner states:

The proclamation of the Gospel is permanently interactive: no one is untouched by the grace of God, and the proclaimed message will only be heard aright if it somehow interacts - in ways that might be surprising, creative or unprecedented-with the self-gift of God already present (Rahner 2004: 28).

It would be possible to account for some of the shifts reported by the women simply looking at psychological factors: a weekly meeting with an accepting person in the form of the director and the use of the imaginal dialogue to engage different aspects of the self. This process would in itself create the possibility of an expanded image of self as previously subjugated or repressed parts of the self find a space. However, the power of the process is precisely in the creation of a space in which our natural faculties are open to receive the self-communication of God which transforms. There

is too the belief with which the women enter the Exercises that God exists and that a relationship with God is possible. The imaginative contemplations are engaged in from the perspective of the exercitant who believes that the One she engages with in the contemplations exists beyond her imagination and has the power to heal, console and strengthen. The shifts which were described were lasting. The women interviewed up to ten years after making the Exercises were able to articulate the changes which had taken place in their self and God-images through the process of making the Exercises. While these continue to change and deepen as they continue their spiritual process, the Exercises were described as a key time in that on-going spiritual journey

# CHAPTER NINE - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIRECTORS

## 9.1 CONCLUSIONS

The thesis examines the imaginal and relational/dialogical processes of the Spiritual Exercises and their role in enabling positive shifts in image of self and image of God in women making the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat. I began by reviewing literature related to the Spiritual Exercises, and in particular the literature which specifically addresses women's experience. It was evident that very little has been written about the experience of women, most especially laywomen, making the Exercises and most of the literature on the Exercises is from a rather masculinist Jesuit perspective. Authors whose work on women and the Exercises contributed most significantly to my own thinking are Katherine Dyckman, Mary Gavin and Elizabeth Liebert's *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed. Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (2001) and Janet Ruffing's work on desire in her book *Spiritual Direction beyond the Beginnings* (2000). These sources were particularly helpful in providing insight into the experience of women in the United States. Bearing in mind the importance of allowing the text of the Exercises to continue to speak in new ways in different contexts, this thesis has sought to add to the work being done in other parts of the world the voices of lay women making the Exercises in the African context.

The thesis research involved qualitative in-depth interviews with nineteen women about their experience of making the Exercises: fifteen who had completed the Exercises in daily life and four who were engaged in the process at the time of being interviewed. All but one of the women interviewed reported experiencing significant shifts in their image of God and self. In general there was a marked positive shift from pre-Exercises images of God which tended to be either benevolent but distant, or ambivalent in which God's love was experienced as conditional. These pre-Exercises images of God tended to be linked with defensive and predominantly monological

ways of relating in which women overused the voices of pleaser, performer, perfectionist or chameleon.

Women who entered the process with less positive images of God, tended to experience more marked shifts in image of God and self and spoke about this shift as the most significant outcome of the Exercises. Those who entered the process with a more positive image of God tended to emphasize growth in intimacy with Jesus as the most significant outcome. In some cases both those shifts were experienced in the same retreat process with the shift in image of God and self most often highlighted in the preparation days and Principle and Foundation, and the deepening intimacy during the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks. It may be that the women who entered the Exercises with unhelpful images of God made the Exercises in a “healing-mode”<sup>105</sup> while the others made them in what I describe as a “deepening-mode.”

In the course of making the Exercises (and often in the preparatory process leading up to the Exercises), the women’s image of God tended to shift to a more relational one in which she experiences herself as unconditionally loved and accepted. The gap between professed and operative images of God also tended to narrow as the women had the experience of God’s unconditional love for them which for many had previously been a concept they assented to intellectually but had not experienced. Shifts in the early part of the Exercises process (Principle and Foundation) were linked with some of the women coming to see themselves mirrored in the gaze of a loving God. Shifts in the later part of the Exercises (Second and Third Week) were linked to a deepened intimacy with Jesus through the imaginative and dialogical prayer methods of Gospel Contemplation and colloquy.

As expected, shifts in image of God and self were integrally interconnected. As the women experienced God as accepting they came to see themselves as acceptable and loved for who they are. This in turn impacted not only on their spiritual life and relationship with God, but also on their human relationships and the ways in which they engage with the world. Feminist theologians and psychologists have emphasized

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<sup>105</sup> As noted in chapter two John Veltri talks about two modes of making the Exercises which he calls ‘healing-mode’ and ‘call-mode’. See *Orientalions 2 Part B*. (Ontario: Guelph Centre for Ignatian Spirituality 1998)

that women often seem to suppress their own desires. The desire to be accepted by significant others and to be in relationship with them frequently results in a distorted shaping of themselves into the person they believe the other wants them to be. The relationship with Christ which they discover in the Exercises is one in which there is freedom to be themselves. They need neither to hide their gifts nor to perform or achieve in order to merit love.

A lessening of defensive processes was evident in the majority of the women interviewed with a sense of a greater freedom which became possible as alternative “I-positions” emerged or were strengthened. The sustained experience of Gospel Contemplation and colloquy appear to provide an “alternative imaginal landscape” in which, through dialogue with Jesus and the people in the Gospel stories, the women were able to explore and engage with different, less dominant aspects of themselves, evoked in the dialogue or through a process of identification with characters in the Gospel stories. The process of Gospel Contemplation allowed the woman to engage intensively and actively with her own God-representation or image of God, allowing it to become reshaped. I argue that this method of prayer which uses both the imagination and dialogue seems particularly useful in helping to shift image of God and self.

Many of the women came into the process lacking a current and developed “subjective-object God.”<sup>106</sup> The process of Gospel Contemplation allowed them to engage the “subjective-object God” by bringing their own experience, conscious and unconscious needs and desires into imaginal prayer experiences. It also allowed them to engage with the “objective-object God” through the scriptural material offered for prayer. In the space between the two there was the opportunity to encounter God, who is beyond both subjective-object images and objective-object images but who reveals something of God’s self in the space between the two.

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<sup>106</sup> The concepts of subjective-object God and objective-object God were explained in chapter six. Ann Ulanov uses these concepts which build on Donald Winnicott’s work in her book. *Finding Space. Winnicott, God and Psychic Reality*. (Westminster John Knox Press 2001)

Rahner's (1969, 1964) theology of grace as God's self-communication in and through our human experience was helpful for a theological consideration of the processes involved in shifts in image of self and God. Although God appears to work predominantly in and through natural processes including imaginal dialogue and the relationship with the director, God is not limited by these. Experiences of consolation without previous cause, for example are the surprising and unforgettable experiences of experiencing God's love at a new depth or intensity.

Gospel Contemplation seemed to function theologically to allow the woman to come to know and love the person of Jesus through encountering him in the experiences of his life and ministry. Coming to see Jesus as a human being who could identify with the woman's experience, and she with much of his, enabled a sense of mutuality and relationship to develop. This experience of a new intimacy with Jesus started in the Second Week for a number of the women, but reached its climax in the experience of accompanying Jesus in his passion. The Third Week is frequently pivotal in the experience of the Exercises for many women, in particular in relation to the development of an intimate relationship with the person of Jesus. Often being with Jesus in the moments of his greatest vulnerability - the nativity and the passion - allow the woman to enter a new depth of relationship. Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert's description of a movement in relating to God which develops through the Exercises from "transcendence to immanence to intimacy" was very apparent (2001: 241).

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence for the interplay between psychological and spiritual processes in the Spiritual Exercises in particular, and spiritual experience in general, resonating with the work of Meissner (1987, 2003) and Ulanov (2001). It also resonates with Rahner's relational theology of grace (1960, 1964) as God's self-communication. This parallels the move in psychology towards the relational which is strongly evident in both object-relations theory and the more recent Dialogical Self psychology.

## **9.2 OBSERVATIONS FOR DIRECTORS OF WOMEN IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> ANNOTATION EXERCISES**

### **9.2.1 The role of the director**

The role of the director emerged as significant in facilitating shifts in image of God and self. While recognizing that it is vitally important that the director keep the focus of the directee on God, it was evident that for many of the women this relationship between director and directee provided an important bridge in the process of a shifting image of God and self. It also provided a facilitative, holding environment within which the God-representation could be engaged. It seems that the director may need to play a more active role in the preparation days and Principle and Foundation before stepping back and allowing “the Creator to deal with the Creature” (Sp. Exx: 15).

In the first phase of learning how to pray and of beginning to discover herself and her desires the woman usually needs encouragement and reassurance that she is on the right track. The director provides a significant alternative voice which can ally itself gently with tentative newly-emerging “I positions” Without the reassurance of the director in the initial stages the shifts may be experienced as too frightening. The women spoke about their experience in the initial stages of the Exercises of wanting to believe what was happening for them but having doubts because it seemed too good or in their minds “selfish”. Many women’s ideas of what is “selfish” are in fact distortions arising out of socialization into a restricted range of I-positions. The director may need to assist them through their prayer to develop new criteria for discernment. In that initial period, defensive inner voices and external voices are still dominant. The director also needs to help the person to hold onto significant shifts by reminding them of key consolations. The more distorted the woman’s image of self and God, the greater the role of the director in psychologically and spiritually containing women as they enter the new landscape of relational experience of God, and in creating a space within which alternate representations of God can be heard and relationally experienced. Those women who have been exposed to theologies in which the self is distorted or negated often struggle to believe that they are valued. The experience of being accepted and valued by the director in that early period was

extremely important for some women as it modeled for them an experience of being unconditionally loved and accepted which was necessary as a bridge to discovering that much more fully in the relationship with God.

The director should be aware that not everyone in the retreatant's life will be supportive of the changes taking place in her. Significant others, for example husband and people in her church community, may find a new self-esteem, ability to make decisions and set boundaries uncomfortable and even threatening. She may need to hold on to the shifts of the retreat in the face of a lack of understanding from others or even opposition.

It is important to recognise that our context is very different from the context of Ignatius in which he characteristically had already spent significant amounts of time, sometimes years, accompanying people before he took them into the Exercises. Either we need to spend significantly more time preparing people in spiritual direction before they make the Exercises or we need to recognise that the director's more active input and support in the initial stages of the Exercises may be crucial.

### **9.2.2 Facilitating imaginal and relational prayer**

Not all the women were able to enter into imaginative contemplation in the way it is outlined by Ignatius. For these exercitants, directors were none the less able to creatively facilitate the development of a dialogical relationship in other ways which had a similar effect. Writing the words of the colloquy as a dialogue using different coloured inks or writing letters from the retreatant to Jesus and from him to her based on a particular Gospel encounter facilitated the enfleshment of a relationship. Sometimes a picture given to the retreatant or a movie gave enough visual stimulation to engage the imagination and acted as a springboard into the dialogue. Passages prayed using *lectio divina* took on the quality of a conversation as directees were encouraged to allow the words which emerged to be the starting place for dialogue with God. Directors may need to be creative in helping their directees to find alternative ways to enter into Imaginative Dialogue where they struggle to imagine themselves into the Gospel Story.

### 9.2.3 Preparation days

The preparation days in the Nineteenth Annotation are the weeks, and in some cases months, leading up to entering into the Exercises. From the research it would seem that the combination of Ignatian imaginative prayer and of regular spiritual direction was sufficient to help the woman to shift from a more distant or ambivalent image of God to one which she could trust. While this took place most noticeably in the context of the Exercises themselves, there might have been more space for the focus on a growth in intimacy with Jesus during the Exercises if more time had been given to preparation days. This would only be the case however with regular direction and exposure to imaginative forms of prayer. In the case of Lisa<sup>107</sup> who initially came into direction with a strong sense of the conditionality of God's love and of a need to suppress the emotional and feminine aspects of herself, it took two years of regular direction and prayer for her to be ready to begin the Exercises. Sometimes however it is the sustained intensity of the daily imaginal prayer and the weekly meetings with the director which are necessary in order for meaningful shifts in image of God and self to take place. For some women this is only possible in the context of making the Exercises. It is important not to be too purist about what the Exercises "should" look like. If in making them the exercitant is led to a deeper relationship with God then they are meeting their purpose.

### 9.2.4 The Election

The election for most of the women was not focused specifically on ministry and mission. I maintain that it is important to recognise that election for some women may be a more interior process. For some the election in the retreat was a call "to *be* with Christ." This may be an important corrective for many women whose lives have been obsessed with doing out of a need to earn the love and approval of others. For these women I believe the healing of the Exercises is in the realization that they do not need to do in order to earn or keep God's love.

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<sup>107</sup> Lisa is the second case study discussed in chapter five.

### **9.2.5 Nineteenth Annotation and residential components.**

A number of the retreatants had the experience of at least two short (three days) residential retreat times within the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation Retreat. Where this happened it tended to be either at the end of the Principle and Foundation or during the Third Week. This approach seemed to be very fruitful, with breakthrough moments often happening at these times. This may be related to the fact that for most of the women the Principle and Foundation and Third Week were the times in the Retreat when key shifts took place. However, the space to focus on the prayer away from the other demands of daily life seemed to also be important. This raises the question of whether it would not be preferable to make the Exercises as a 30-day retreat. It is impossible to know the answer to this question as no comparison was done with women who made the Exercises residentially. My sense listening to the women is that the combination of making the retreat in daily life with one or two short residential retreats is a very helpful practice. The experience of making the retreat in daily life allows for the shifts in identity and in ways of relating to happen gradually within the context in which they are being lived out and to be integrated. The addition of short periods of residential engagement within the retreat allow for a more sustained emersion in dialogical prayer process in which perhaps incipient shifts are able to take place more easily.

### **9.2.6 Structure and freedom**

The Exercises seem to also offer a school of prayer for those who have a desire for “more”. Many women spoke about the accountability of the weekly meeting and having specific material to pray as providing a containing frame in which they could establish a serious life of prayer.<sup>108</sup> At the same time they feel a sense of freedom within the structure -that their experience can unfold in a way unique to them. The sense of containment provided by a weekly process in which there was a set time to meet with the spiritual director provided a space within which it felt safe to explore. This may also be connected to the alleviation of the anxiety felt by many about what

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<sup>108</sup> Interestingly many seem quite lost in the months after the Exercises and miss the safety of that structure.

they were “allowed” to think and feel and express in prayer. Some sense of knowing what to do which is provided by having specific material for prayer; an expectation of how long to pray and a regular space in which to talk to someone about that experience provides a balance for what may emerge as new, and challenging to how they experience God and themselves.

### **9.3. FUTURE CHALLENGES AND OTHER POSSIBLE AREAS OF RESEARCH**

A challenge we are still grappling with in relation to giving the Exercises in South Africa is how to inculturate them to speak to the experience of black women. The Exercises have yet to be translated into a local South African language and there are still only a few black women who have made the Exercises and who are trained to give them.<sup>109</sup>

In 2008 the Jesuit Institute-South Africa launched an inculturated programme in which Ignatian methods of prayer are taught in Catholic parishes in Soweto<sup>110</sup>. This was done after extensive qualitative research into spiritual needs in the townships. As more women in the townships are offered the opportunity to make the Spiritual Exercises it will be interesting to be able to do similar research to explore their experience of making the Spiritual Exercises.

It would also be interesting to do similar research with men who have made the Spiritual Exercises to be able to make a comparative study of the experience of men and women making the Exercises. Joint research by a man and woman writing a comparative analysis together might be particularly illuminating.

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<sup>109</sup> In South Africa there are, to the best of my knowledge only two black women who have trained to give the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, Puleng Matsaneng and Dorothy Phadi.

<sup>110</sup> The programme called Tsoteletsa, developed by Puleng Matsaneng has been launched in three Soweto parishes to date, Emdeni, Orlando East and Pimville. The programme teaches Ignatian methods of prayer, Gospel Contemplation and the Examen of Consciousness and integrates culturally significant experiences such as dreams and ancestors.

## 9.4 CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that the imaginal and dialogical/relational processes of the Spiritual Exercises facilitate shifts in image of God and self in laywomen making the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation retreat in South Africa. It is exciting to see the way in which Ignatius's emphasis on imaginative and dialogical prayer create an optimal context, not only for growth in relationship with God, but also for the development the self to its full potential. The research has provided further insight into the experience of women making the Exercises. It seems that the focus on the relational is extremely important for women in the Exercises and, I would argue, more important for most than the emphasis which has traditionally been placed in the Spiritual Exercises on discernment for mission. The Exercises seem to provide an especially graced context in which there can be a healing of areas of unfreedom which prevent many women from living fully and authentically. Human development as this thesis shows is both psychological and spiritual, with development in one aspect facilitating a corresponding development in the other.

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## **APPENDIX 1A: LIST OF INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN WHO HAD COMPLETED THE EXERCISES**

**Note that copies of the transcribed interviews are available if required.**

	<b>Initial Contact. (interview unless noted)</b>	<b>Follow-up interview 1</b>	<b>Follow-up interview 2</b>	<b>Follow-up e-mail</b>
Interviewee 1	16/03/2005			15/11/2005
Interviewee 2	18/03/2005			
Interviewee 3	27/03/2005	18/04/2005	15/10/2007	
Interviewee 4	25/05/2005 (e-mail)	23/09/2005		
Interviewee 5	19/06/2005 e-mail	08/10/2007		
Interviewee 6	20/07/2006			
Interviewee 7	21/07/2006			
Interviewee 8	15/08/2007			05/12/2007
Interviewee 9	24/08/2007			
Interviewee 10	27/08/2007			
Interviewee 11	03/09/2007			
Interviewee 12	15/09/2007			10/10/2007
Interviewee 13	08/10/2007			
Interviewee 14	14/10/2007			
Interviewee 15	15/10/2007			

**APPENDIX 1B: LIST OF INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN  
IN THE PROCESS OF MAKING THE EXERCISES**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Interview</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Interview</b>
Developmental Interviewee 1	15/06/2006 End of Principle and Foundation	10/03/2007 During the Third Week
Developmental Interviewee 2	18/07/2006 During the 1 <sup>st</sup> Week	
Developmental Interviewee 3	11/10/2007 Beginning of the Second Week.	
Developmental Interviewee 4	24/11/2007 Beginning of the Exercises	06/05/2008 End of Principle and Foundation